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THE PROLOGUE.

I.

"**W**ILL he come? If he does, it will be good-bye for ever to this life of want and misery!"

"Will he be there? If he is, it spells fortune to me. Millions will be within my grasp!"

These two pregnant utterances, so like and yet unlike, were spoken almost at the same moment, by two entirely different people, separated at that particular instant by a distance of half a mile!

The first speaker, a man of disreputable, well-begone aspect, crowded the words into his unkempt beard and into the lapels of his ragged coat, as, like the poverty-stricken outcast of London streets that he was, he moodily paced up and down the paved space in front of the Marble Arch on the north side of Hyde Park.

The second speaker was a well-dressed and prosperous-looking man (of middle age, like the other), who was at that moment being whirled along the Edgware Road in a taxicab.

It had been a fairly fine summer day, but now with the approach of evening, threatening clouds had gathered in the sky and a steady drizzle began to set in. The crowds of pedestrians going this way or that, quickened their steps to escape the rain.

Into this stream of hurrying humanity the man in the taxi alighted as the cab pulled up at the corner of Edgware Road. As he stepped on to the pavement, the rib-end of an umbrella caught his hat and sent it rolling to the ground. Several people made a dive for it including the owner himself. For a moment there was a confused block on the pavement, then the hat was recovered and handed back to the owner.

But what had happened to him in that brief interval? As he straightened himself and was about to put his hat on again, he was observed to go deadly pale and then stagger forward! Two or three men caught him ere he could fall, and tried to set him on his feet.

Vainly, however! For his eyes closed and his form limply collapsed in one of the men's arms.

"Why, he's swooned!" cried an onlooker.

But it was worse than a swoon, as they quickly found on carrying him to the shelter of an open doorway and placing him down.

A crowd gathered at once—the usual cosmopolitan crowd which London can always furnish at a moment's notice. A tall gentleman, with iron-grey hair, elbowed his way to the front, startled by the purplish tinge on the unconscious man's face.

"I'm a medical man," he said. "Please let me get to him!"

"Make way for the doctor!" cried some body, and a lane was made.

The medical man bent down, opened the patient's coat and waistcoat and placed a stetho-

scoop back his shirt, and placed a stetho-

scoop to his chest.

A grave look came into his face and he shook his head.

"He is past all mortal aid," he said.

"He is dead!"

An awestruck murmur swept through the crowd. It seemed all too terrible that what had seemed a trivial incident had developed into grim tragedy. Sensation reigned, and the people surged to swell the crowd.

But what was that on the other side of the broad open space? What was the meaning of that other crowd thronging together under the very shadow of the Marble Arch, forty yards or more away? A

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Another tragedy—nothing less! Another tragedy, equally sudden and grim as the one that had occurred at the corner of the Edgware Road!

For there, in the midst of the people and lying on the ground, was the bearded man in rags to whom we have already made reference. He, like the other, had been seen to stagger from side to side, and then suddenly to pitch forward on his face. He, too, had secured the attention of a passing doctor, and the medical verdict was the same as in the other case.

"Dead! The poor fellow is dead!"

On this grim scene of startling double tragedy arrived two people destined to play a leading part in solving the mystery which it involved. They were Sexton Blake, the famous detective, and his young assistant, Tinker!

They also were in a taxicab, and were on their way from Baker Street, where they lived, to Chelsea, whether they had been summoned by the police to identify a certain man who had just been arrested in connection with a forgery case in which Sexton Blake had been interested some weeks before.

As they approached Marble Arch, the crowd was at its densest, and their cab was perforce brought to a standstill. As it pulled up a cry went up:

"Make way for the ambulance!"

A white-enamelled motor vehicle shot past them close by.

"An accident!" murmured Blake. "Some poor fellow run over, I suppose."

He thrust his head out of the window and called to a policeman as to what had happened.

"Something out of the way, sir," answered the constable with unwonted excitement. "Two men have just dropped down dead!"

"Two men have dropped down dead!" echoed Blake aghast, for certainly the news thus crudely told was indeed startling.

"Tinker, this is as strange a thing as I've heard of for some time. We look like being hung up here for a minute or two, so we'll see what it is."

He hopped out of the cab, followed by Tinker, and with a word to the driver that they would be back in a minute or so, hurried forward. Pressing through the crowd he caught sight of Police-Inspector Stallway (with whom also he was quite well acquainted) who had had the two dead men placed side by side, and was now helping to lift them into the ambulance.

"Strange affair this, inspector," he observed, approaching him.

"Very strange, Mr. Blake."

"Apart from their deaths, they're an oddly-assorted pair to have been together."

"Oh, but they weren't together, sir. That's the queerest part of it. They dropped down almost at the same moment, but they were a good forty yards apart at the time. It's the most wonderful coincidence I've ever known, for two men, complete strangers to one another, to have died suddenly like this at the same moment."

"Surely they're not complete strangers

to one another. Or at least, they'd arranged to meet!" exclaimed Blake.

If Inspector Stallway heard the somewhat remarkable words which had come from Blake as the result of a piece of lightning deduction he did not heed them. The officer was speaking to the ambulance driver, instructing him to drive to St. Matthew's Hospital.

Tinker, however, had caught the sentence, and was marvelling at it.

"What did you mean, gov'nor, by saying the two men had arranged to meet?" he asked as the ambulance drove away.

"Couldn't you see? It was pretty plain. The well-dressed man had a yellow rose in his buttonhole. The other had a bit of yellow ribbon pinned to his coat."

"Yes, I noticed that; but—"

"The men may have been complete strangers to one another, or they may not have seen one another for a long time! But they had arranged to meet, and the yellow rose and ribbon were the means by which they were to recognise one another. I think we shall find that is so when the inquest is held. But come on. We must get back to our cab and along to Chelsea."

They went, for although, as we have said, they were to play a leading part in the solution of this mystery, the time had not come yet for them to take a hand in it. So far as they knew at present, there was no great mystery in it.

Hastily answering Tinker's question on the subject, Blake suggested that both men might be found to have suffered from heart disease, and the prospect of meeting after a long separation may have acted in the nature of a fatal shock to them both. It was a superficial suggestion, of course, but there was a certain amount of probability in it.

Sure, however, the affair was in the hands of the police it was no immediate concern of Blake's. He, therefore, thrust the matter into the background of his mind, and thought of the business he had in hand of identifying the prisoner at Chelsea.

That done, he and Tinker returned to Baker Street, without troubling themselves actively in the affair of the double tragedy at Marble Arch.

II.

THEIR inactivity was not to last very long. Soon they were to be drawn into the affair completely. The police were to be so absolutely puzzled by the mystery that Sexton Blake was to feel impelled to give them his aid. It came about in this wise.

Arrived at the hospital the two dead men had been examined by the doctors there. The latter could find no trace of any sort of injury on either of the bodies, and it was quickly decided that the cause of their strange deaths could only be revealed by a post-mortem examination.

Permission for this being obtained, the medical men at once set to work, the divisional police being represented by Inspector Stallway. He sat waiting in an ad-

joining room till the post-mortem was completed. Then Dr. Ryder came out.

"Well, sir, what is the cause of death?"
 "I'm sorry, but we can't find out!" was the doctor's surprising answer.

"It wasn't heart disease then, as we expected?"

"It most certainly wasn't. The hearts of these two men were absolutely sound—among the soundest we've examined for many a day."

"Then what can have caused death?"

"We can't tell you! We can find no trace of any sort of injury, either external or internal. The cause of death is quite inexplicable. We are absolutely and completely puzzled!"

So was Inspector Stillway. If the doctors couldn't account for the double tragedy, he certainly couldn't.

He turned to the consideration of another phase of the affair—to trying to establish the identity of the two dead men. But here again he found himself up against a stiff problem. Inquire how he might, he could find nothing out about either of the men. Despite the broadcast publication of full descriptions and photographs of the two deceased, not a soul came forward to claim kinship or acquaintance with either of them.

On the face of it the two men seemed to be entirely without friends. Nor was there any scrap of paper or anything of that sort found upon them to point to who they were.

The only man who came forward was one Albert Moy, a young ex-soldier taxi-driver. He told of how he had driven the well-dressed man from Euston Station, and how on alighting from the cab at the corner of Edgware Road he had staggered about a bit and then fallen dead!

"Did anyone else travel with him in the cab?" asked Inspector Stillway.

"No, sir. He was quite alone!"

That was all the information the inspector could obtain, and it left him hopelessly mystified. What further to do he did not know, yet felt impelled to do something. In his dilemma he went to Scotland Yard and laid before some high officials there the meagre details in his possession.

Though the details were meagre, the bed-rock facts were arresting. Two men of widely differing social status, utterly unknown to each other (as it seemed), and utterly unknown to anybody else, had fallen dead at almost precisely the same moment within a few yards of each other! As to the cause of death, neither the doctors nor anybody else could shed the faintest light.

Here was a mystery, a hopelessly tangled, baffling mystery, worthy of the best brains to tackle. So thought Sir Henry Fairfax, the Chief Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard, before whom the matter had been laid. Without hesitation he placed the case in the hands of Detective-Inspector Conover, one of the shrewdest officers at the "Yard."

Detective-Inspector Conover got to work at once. He caused inquiries to be made far and wide, but without discovering anything at all. At the end of two days he

had to confess his failure to Inspector Stillway.

"I've drawn a blank," he said. "This mystery is beyond me. I'm flabbergasted!"

"What else can we do?"

"I don't know. We shall have to go on inquiring, of course, but the more time passes the more tangled the affair will get. But the inquest's to-morrow, and I've to report to the Chief to-night. I fear I'll be wild. You might come with me to help face the music."

Sir Henry Fairfax wasn't wild, but he was disappointed.

"I hoped to have something for the coroner to-morrow, and you've no sort of clue at all?"

"None, Sir Henry," answered Detective-Inspector Conover gloomily. "I never felt so hopelessly at sea in my life."

"You've found out nothing to connect the two dead men with each other?"

"Nothing at all, sir. In my opinion the two men were strangers to each other, and their simultaneous deaths just a wonderful coincidence."

The Chief Commissioner shook his head.

"I can hardly think that. The coincidence is too astounding. There must have been some connection between them, if only we could establish it, I fancy."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Henry—" broke in Inspector Stillway, and then stopped, with a slight flush on his face.

For at that moment something had shot into his mind. For the first time he recalled the words which Sexton Blake had spoken, and which, being busy with the ambulance, he had ignored at the time.

"Well, what is it, Stillway?" asked the Chief Commissioner, looking at him keenly.

"Anything to tell me?"

"Why, sir, what you've just said has reminded me that Mr. Sexton Blake said the same thing."

"Eh! Mr. Sexton Blake? How does he come into it?"

"He happened to be at Marble Arch, sir, just as we were placing the dead men on the ambulance."

"Yes, yes! And what did he say?" asked Sir Henry eagerly.

"I'd forgotten it till now, sir, being busy and excited at the time, but just now it all came back to me in a flash. I'd just remarked that the two dead men seemed to be complete strangers to one another, when Mr. Blake said, 'Surely they're not complete strangers—or, at least they'd arranged to meet!'"

"Mr. Blake said that? What did he mean by it?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't ask him at the time. I was too anxious to get the men to the hospital."

"We must find out what he did mean. It was an extraordinary thing to say, and he must have had some reason for saying it."

Detective-Inspector Conover's nostrils quivered. He was an able officer in his way, but he had a streak of what so often mars an able man—jealousy! He didn't like this calling in of outside help in a matter in which he had failed.

"Excuse me, Sir Henry," he interposed, "but it must have been just guesswork on Mr Blake's part. There was nothing to show him or anybody else that there was any connection between the two men. Mr. Blake is very impulsive, and has a queer way of jumping to conclusions."

"His impulses are always guided by reason, and his conclusions are generally right," returned Sir Henry, a little drily. "Anyway, his remark was a curious one, and I want to know what he meant by it. Please get on the telephone to him. If he's in, ask him to be good enough to wait for me as I'm coming along to see him at once!"

Conover bit his lip as he went to do the chief's bidding.

"This is annoying," he muttered. "I was just about to put in for promotion. Now if Sexton Blake comes in and succeeds where I have failed, it may crab my chance!"

He remained dismal for a moment, then backed up.

"Why should it crab my chance? Sexton Blake's a clever man, a very clever man! But I flatter myself I'm smart, too. Why shouldn't I solve this mystery after all, and beat him at his own game? By Jove, I'll have a good try! Directly I've phoned off to him, I'll get on the warpath again and see if I can't discover a clue that'll set me on the right track!"

The End of the Prologue.

CHAPTER 1.

At the Mortuary.

SEXTON BLAKE was in when the telephone-bell rang. So also was Tinker, who answered it. He came back into the study with shining eyes.

"You'll have to buy a new cap, sir!" he cried out.

"What the dickens do you mean, laddie?" "I mean there's another feather to stick in it, and there's no room left in the old one. Where do you think the 'phone message was from?"

"Don't know—where?"

"Scotland Yard!"

"There's nothing particularly new in that."

"Just so, but what do you think the message was? Who do you think is coming to see you presently?"

"How should I know?"

"The Chief Commissioner himself—Sir Henry Fairfax!"

"Really! What does he want to see me about?"

"They didn't say, except that it was on very urgent business."

"It must be, or Sir Henry wouldn't call on me like this. But we shall soon know."

They were to know within the next quarter of an hour, by which time the Chief Commissioner was shown into the room. He was accompanied by Police-in-

spector Stillway and Detective-Inspector Conover.

"Sorry to worry you, Mr. Blake," Sir Henry said. "But I'm hoping you'll be able to help us."

"In what matter?"

"The affair of the double tragedy at Marble Arch, two days ago. Inspector Stillway tells me you happened to be passing at the time."

"That's so. But I know next to nothing about it. I only just saw the two men as they were being placed on the ambulance. Who were they?"

"That's just what we can't discover, and what we want to know—that and other things. At present we're at a dead-end. We can find out nothing about either of the dead men; neither their names nor to where they belong. The inquest is to-morrow. We've next to no evidence for the coroner, and we'd like to have some. That's why I've come to you."

Blake's eyebrows went up in surprise.

"What can I do? I know nothing about the case. I can't hope to find out anything by to-morrow, if you've failed to find out anything in two days."

"Ah! But we can form no theory on the matter at all, while it appears you formed one at a glance!"

"A theory—I formed no theory!" exclaimed Blake in surprise.

"You made a suggestion then. Inspector Stillway tells me that when he said he thought the two men were utter strangers to each other, you made a remark to the effect that the two men had arranged to meet each other."

"Why, so I did, and I believe that's probable."

"What made you think so?"

"A little thing I noticed. A mere trifle, but significant. Your officers must have noticed it also. I mean the fact that the well-dressed man was wearing a yellow rose in his buttonhole, while the ragged man had a bit of yellow ribbon fastened to his waist."

"Why, yes, sir; I noticed that!" said Stillway.

"And so did I," remarked Conover a little acidly. "But I don't think there was anything in that. It isn't unusual for a gentleman to wear a yellow rose."

"Oh, quite so—but the ribbon of the same colour! What do you make of that, inspector?" queried Blake.

"I don't know that I make anything of it, sir," replied the Scotland Yard man, a little irritably. "Years ago, people used to wear bits of blue ribbon as a sign that they were total abstainers. Why shouldn't a man wear a bit of yellow ribbon for some similar purpose?"

"I don't think this man did—and I'll tell you why. A man who wears a ribbon as a badge of membership of some society, has it etched or fixed in permanently. This was merely pinned, showing that it was worn for a special occasion."

Conover shrugged his shoulders. This little bit of reasoning irritated him the more on account of its very simplicity, and because

he had overlooked the circumstance that had called it forth. He said nothing further, but Sir Henry Fairfax said.

"That's a very interesting bit of observation, Mr. Blake," he said. "What do you deduce from it?"

"Merely this: That the rose and ribbon of the same colour were worn so that the two men might recognise each other. It is all hypothesis, of course; but what I should imagine to be the truth is that whether these two men knew one another personally or not, they, at any rate, knew of one another. More than this, they had some business in common, and wished to meet in order to discuss it. They arranged, therefore, to wear some distinguishing badge by which they might know each other—the well-to-do man a yellow rose, and the other, not being able to afford a flower, a bit of ribbon of the same colour."

Detective-inspector Conover dare not sniff in the presence of the Chief Commissioner, or perhaps he would have done so. As it was, he showed his annoyance by a slight curling of his lip.

Sir Henry himself did otherwise. So far from showing anything like disdain of Blake's deduction, he plainly revealed his admiration of it.

"I believe your reasoning is right, Mr. Blake," he observed thoughtfully. "You've given us a start on a line of inquiry, and that's more than we were able to obtain for ourselves."

"It's very little, I fear," Blake answered. "I'm only sorry I can't tell you more, but then, as you know, I've taken no sort of active part in the case."

The Chief Commissioner darted a quick look at him.

"Will you take an active part in it?" he asked suddenly. "Will you help us to get to the bottom of this business?"

"You know I never like—" Blake was beginning, when Sir Henry broke in again with:

"I know you never like interfering in matters which the police already have in hand, but there are cases where outside assistance is justified. Will you look upon this as one? Will you take the case up?"

"If I am allowed to conduct my inquiry on my own lines, and am not to be tied to the official view," answered Blake, who, from the expression on Conover's face, foresaw difficulties with that officer.

"Of course," assented Sir Henry readily. "It may be that your opinion and that of my officers may later on converge and blend together, and that you will be able to work in co-operation. All the better if you can. At the same time, you will be at perfect liberty to act independently, if your views and theirs differ."

"Very well, then. I will take up the case," replied Blake. Then, after a moment's thought, he added. "If we are to obtain any definite evidence for the coroner tomorrow, we must lose no time. Where are the dead bodies?"

"At Keddiford Street Mortuary."

"I should like to examine them."

"They have already been most carefully

examined by us and the doctors," put in Conover.

"Well, I'm sure you won't mind my making an independent inspection?" smiled Blake.

"Certainly not! I'll come with you to the mortuary," answered the detective-inspector, with studied politeness.

"Then I'll leave you to it," replied Sir Henry, and shook hands with Sexton Blake. "You'll let me know of any developments?"

"Of course."

The Chief Commissioner went back to Scotland Yard, while the others at once made for the mortuary.

For half an hour Blake examined the bodies without coming upon any trace of injury, or any sort of clue as to what had led to their deaths. Suddenly, however, as he pressed back with his fingers the hair on the back of the ragged man's head, he gave a slight start.

He peered closer, then out came his lens, and he looked through that. This time he uttered a little cry.

"What is it?" asked Conover. "Found anything?"

"A slight—very slight abrasion of the scalp, at the base of the cerebellum," answered Blake, pointing just above the nape of the dead man's neck. "Look at it through my lens."

"H'm!" replied Conover, looking through the glass. "I don't think there's much in that. You can hardly call that a wound; it's no more than the prick of a needle!"

"Quite so, but there it is. The scalp has been perforated."

The Scotland Yard man looked as if he didn't attach much importance.

"I don't think there's anything in it, Mr. Blake—I really don't. The man may have had this spot on his head for a long time. I can't think that it had anything to do with his death."

"I don't know; but we may be able to settle that," Blake said.

He passed across to the other body, and gently turned the head so that he could examine the back of it. He knew exactly the spot at which he wanted to look now, and almost immediately another little cry came from him.

"Look—look, inspector! There's perforation here exactly like the other!"

Again Conover took the lens and looked at the spot indicated.

"Yes, you're right about the mark, sir," he had to admit. "It's very like the other—very like. But it's so very slight. I don't see how such a small thing can have had anything to do with their deaths."

"It's remarkable though that both heads should have the same mark in the same place."

"Maybe, but—"

"Anyway, where all else is darkness, we can't afford to despise a glimmer of light, however faint. The doctors must be told of this at once."

"What can they do? They've already conducted a post-mortem examination, and found nothing. What more can they do?"

"Perform an autopsy!"

"An internal examination! For what purpose?" asked Conover irritably. "Excuse me, Mr. Blake, but what have you got in your bonnet now?"

"A peculiarly loud-buzzing specimen, inspector. It's dining a suggestion into my ears that'll prevent my resting till it has been put to the test."

"What is the suggestion?"

"That these two men may have died as the result of poison being injected into the brain from the back of the head, by means of a hypodermic syringe."

"Great Scott! That's a large order!"

"So it may be; but I'm going to tell the doctors at once."

Dr. Ryder, who had assisted in the post-mortem examination, was round at St. Matthew's Hospital when presently Blake called. He listened to the detective's story with the greatest surprise and interest.

"This sounds like a most important discovery, Mr. Blake," he said. "I must see Dr. Thomson at once."

Dr. Thomson was the police-surgeon who had been present with him at the post-mortem.

In a few minutes both doctors were back at the mortuary with Blake. Their examination of the dead men's heads confirmed what the detective had told them.

"Undoubtedly a perforation," was the police-surgeon's opinion, "and quite likely to have been caused by a hyperdermic needle. We must have the bodies taken back to the operating theatre at the hospital, in order that an autopsy may be performed at once. Are you coming along with us, Mr. Blake?"

"Not just now, as I can do no good. Besides that, I want to examine the men's clothing. But, of course, I'm eager to hear your report. When do you think you'll be ready?"

"The surgical operation won't take very long, but the chemical analysis of the brain will occupy an hour or two. We ought to be able to report by, say, ten o'clock to-night."

"Very well, doctor. I'll be round at the hospital at ten."

Having arranged for the transfer of the bodies, the doctors took their leave, while Blake started on an inspection of the dead men's clothing.

He turned to the ragged man first.

"I don't think you'll find anything," said Conover. "We overhauled his clothes pretty thoroughly, and all we found was a scrap of paper."

"Ah, yes!" said Blake, pausing in his work. "Inspector Stillway mentioned that. There was some writing on it, wasn't there?"

"Just a few words, but it might as well have been gibberish for all we can make of it. Here it is."

He passed over a dirty scrap of paper, on which appeared this:

"F. L. Wolsey Road, S.E.
Do, Pennithorne Street, W.C."

"H'm!" murmured Blake. "What do you make of this?"

"Well, the only thing we could make of it was that the dead man had an acquaintance whose initials were 'F. L.' living either in Wolsey Road or Pennithorne Street. But we've inquired at every house in both places, and can find nobody with those initials, or who was acquainted with the dead man."

"The words must have some meaning. We must try and find out what, later on."

He pursued his task of searching the ragged man's clothes, only to find that Conover was right. No further clue to the man's identity could he find.

But with the clothes of the well-dressed man it was different. For, not content with examining the pockets and buttons, he began fiddling at the lining. This, however, revealed nothing until of a sudden his fingers halted as they gripped the striped hip-band at the top of the trousers inside.

"Something here!" he exclaimed. "Thicker at one point than at others. Something under the lining, I fancy."

Out came his penknife to cut through the stitches of the hip-band, and to rip away the striped lining.

"Ah, thought as much!" he exclaimed. "The tab of the tailor who made the suit!"

"Who is it?"

"Manoel Salvados, Plaza Santa Felicitas, Buenos Ayres!"

"South America! Whoever would have thought of looking for the tab in such a place? It isn't a Spanish tailor's custom, is it?"

"Not that I know of. It's curious, and it may be suspicious."

"How suspicious?"

"The clothes are of the best material and well-cut. It is usual, as you know, for a good-class tailor to have his name on the trouser buttons, and to stitch his label inside one of the pockets. The absence of both these things in this case suggests that the man who ordered the suit gave specific instructions that no tab was to be put in, and that the buttons were to be without any name. Such a request may have surprised the tailor—Spaniards are a suspicious people—and that may have led him to put the tab in the place where we found it, and where the customer would not see it. That we may be able to find out, if we can get into communication with Manoel Salvados."

"You'll try?"

"I shall cable him to-morrow. This incident seems to point to the man's having lived in Buenos Ayres. If we can find that out, we may get to know other things about him."

Blake finished his examination of the clothes without finding anything further. He was, however, satisfied with the clue he had discovered, and longed for to-morrow to come when he could cable the tailor.

Before then, though, other things were to happen. News of the utmost importance was to be told them when they reached St. Matthew's Hospital.

It was not quite ten o'clock, but the medical men had completed their work. Dr. Thomson came hurrying into the room where they were.

"Mr. Blake, your suspicions were correct!" he exclaimed, a flush of excitement on his face. "The punctures in the heads of both the men were made by a hypodermic syringe. The cause of death in both cases was by the injection of poison into the brain."

"What was the nature of the poison?"
 "That we cannot determine. All we are certain of is, that it was of a particularly virulent nature, and that it caused almost instantaneous death."

CHAPTER 2.

Inspector Conover Scores a Point.

SEXTON BLAKE was pleased with the result of the evening's work. Detective-inspector Conover was savage! In the interests of abstract justice, he, too, was of course glad at the clues that had been obtained. The galling part was that Sexton Blake, and not he, had brought them to light, and that Sexton Blake, and not he, had won the Chief Commissioner's praise when the matter was reported to him.

"Confound it all!" he muttered surlily to himself, after Blake had left Scotland Yard and gone home. "Why didn't I find those perforations and that tailor's tab? It's just like Sexton Blake to stumble across them after everybody else had missed them. His luck's uncanny—absolutely uncanny!"

He felt he could have kicked himself, but like a sensible man, didn't waste time by doing so useless a thing. Instead, he pulled himself together and registered a great resolve.

"Blake's scored first, but that's no reason why I shouldn't beat him at the finish. The game's only just begun, so there's plenty of time. The two men were killed by foul play, that's certain. It's one to Sexton Blake for having discovered that, but it'll be more than one to me if I run the murderer to earth. I'll have another hunt round Wolsley Road and Pennithorne Street to-morrow. Who knows but what my luck may change?"

His luck was to change before the morrow. A stroke of fortune was to come to him that very night!

For even while he sat alone in his office, thinking over the mystery, a police-clerk entered.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," the clerk announced, handing him a card.

Inspector Conover glanced at the highly-glazed card and read:

"Mr. Francis Gulwood,
 19, Randolph Mansions, W."

"What's he want to see me about?"

"The Marble Arch affair, sir. He says he has some important information to give you."

"By George! Has he, though? Show him up at once!"

Mr. Francis Gulwood came in. He was a tall, well-groomed man, in evening-dress, a typical man-about-town in appearance.

"Please sit down, sir," said the inspector

civily. "I understand you have some important information to give me in regard to the double tragedy at Marble Arch?"

"Why, yes, I believe I have, though I'm not sure whether it will be news to you. I've been out of town, so only read of the affair to-night. Otherwise, I should have come along before to tell you what I know."

"Yes, what do you know, Mr. Gulwood?"

"Well, if the newspaper reports are correct, I at least know one thing that you don't seem to. It is that that taxi-driver chap is an absolute liar!"

"You mean Albert Moy, who drove one of the murdered men from Euston?"

"Yes, that's the chap."

"He's a young ex-soldier of excellent character," said the inspector, referring to a slip of paper at his side. "What makes you think he's a liar?"

"I know he is. He distinctly says that the murdered man was alone in his cab."

"Yes, he told us that definitely."

"And made himself out a liar. The murdered man wasn't alone. Another man entered the cab with him!"

"Are you sure, Mr. Gulwood?"

"Positive!"

"How do you know it?"

"I happened to be at Euston Station that evening when he picked them up. I distinctly saw the murdered man and another enter Moy's cab!"

"How do you know it was Moy's cab? How do you recognise Moy or the murdered man either?"

"From their photographs in the newspaper."

"Ah, yes!" Conover's eyes were glittering with eagerness. "Now about the other man who got into the cab with him. Can you give any description of him?"

"He was a shortish, very thick-set man, with dark hair and swarthy complexion. A foreigner for certain—probably a Spaniard!"

Probably a Spaniard! Conover's heart quickened at that. He recalled the tab of the tailor at Buenos Ayres, a city inhabited by thousands of Spaniards. What more likely than that one of them—His eyes glittered more brightly than ever.

"You are sure of all this, Mr. Gulwood?" he asked.

"Quite sure."

"You will be ready to repeat it on oath?"

"Certainly, if it is necessary."

"It is of the utmost importance that you should. The inquest is to-morrow morning. I shall be glad if you will attend the Coroner's Court at eleven o'clock. Here is the address."

"I will be there. Good-night, inspector."

"Good-night, sir. Much obliged for your valuable information."

Conover really felt obliged. He rubbed his hands with delight when Mr. Gulwood had gone. Luck was coming his way. This latest information was a wonderful stroke. It shed quite a new light on the matter—a flood of light. Why it practically solved half the mystery! For who could reasonably doubt that the swarthy-looking foreigner, "probably a Spaniard," had poisoned the other

during that journey from Euston, and had alighted from the cab on the way? They must have known each other in South America.

But Albert Moy had declared that the murdered man had been in the cab alone! What did that mean? What else could it mean than that Moy was an accomplice in the terrible crime?

"Albert Moy must be arrested!" exclaimed Conover to himself. "I must see about that at once!"

CHAPTER 3.

Joy Turned to Misery.

OBVIOUS of the net which the visit of Mr. Francis Guilewood had started to weave around him, Albert Moy was at that moment in a state of supreme happiness. He was just then employed on the pleasant task of escorting his pretty sweetheart, Nellie Milton, to her home in Camden Town.

Nellie was a programme seller at the Merrimont Theatre, and consequently, having to work at night, was unable to give her society to Albert Moy as often as so ardent a lover would have wished.

To make up for this deficiency, it was the young taxi-driver's habit to take an evening off every now and then and take a seat in the upper circle of the Merrimont Theatre, not so much to see the quite excellent show provided there, as to gaze on the fair features of Nellie between the acts, and now and then to exchange a word with her as she moved among the seats, selling programmes or dispensing cups of coffee and boxes of chocolate. But his joy of joys on such occasions was always the journey home, whither they rode by bus to the north-eastern extremity of Regent's Park, and then completed the journey home—they lived very near to each other—afoot.

This particular night was one of those joyous occasions. So picture the happy young couple walking by quiet by-ways towards the street in Camden Town where they lived.

His arm was about her waist as they walked along a dark road, but on nearing a lighted lamp, Nellie sprang a little away from him with:

"Walk properly now, Bert. Somebody will see us!"

"All right, Nellie darling," he whispered gaily. "Not as it's much of a crime for a chap to put his arm round the girl whom he's going to marry."

"But we're not married yet!"

"Quite right, we're not. And that brings me to the point I've been thinking about all day. It's time we started running in double harness, darling, and I want you to name the day!"

"Oh, Bert, you know I can't," she answered with a pretty blush. "You know we agreed to put it off till we could find a home to settle down in."

"Quite right, my dear."

"Well then, what's the use of talking,

Bert? Haven't we been trying to find a house to let for months past, ever since you got demobbed, and haven't we failed?"

"Quite right, darling!"

"I sometimes think there never will be a house to let again," she sighed.

"Ah!" he broke in with a sudden joyful shout. "There you're wrong, Nellie. I found a house to let this very afternoon! What's more, I snapped it up, and we can have possession in six weeks' time!"

"Oh, Bert! Do you really mean it? It sounds too good to be true."

"It is true, though. The house belongs to a pal of mine on the rank. He bought it before the war through a building society. But now he's chucking taxi-driving and going into private chauffeurin', with his missus as cook in the same family—some big pots down in Leicestershire. So, as he'll be clearing out of his house, he gave me the first chance, and you can bet I was on it like a bird. So there's only one thing to settle, and that is when the other sweet little birdie—that's you, dear—will be ready to come and live in it."

She blushed again, and to cover her maidenly confusion, asked:

"Where is the house, Bert?"

"Over at Shepherd's Bush. It's the duckiest little place in the world. Dinin'-room and parlour, three bedrooms, bath b. and c., as they say in the adverts, kitchen, and scullery, and small garden all complete. And it's to be mine in six weeks' time—that is, ours my love—so name the day, and the sooner the better!"

"Oh, Bert, it does all seem so sudden!"

"Sudden! After we've been engaged all these months? Come, fix up the day, old dear!"

"I don't know what to say."

"Then let me say it for you. Let's get married this day week!"

"Don't be absurd!" She was blushing more deeply than ever. "A week! How can I get my things ready in a week?"

"A fortnight, then?"

"That isn't long enough, either. It must be a month at least."

"Must it. Then we'll make it a month at most. This day month, Nellie? Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, all right, then," she answered in low tones, and hung her head.

And then in a moment the enraptured Bert had her in his arms again, and drawing her into a shadowed doorway, kissed her passionately again and again.

"Now we must get home, or my landlady will wonder what's become of me," whispered Nellie at last.

"All right," said her lover as they started homeward. "One thing, you won't have a landlady much longer; neither shall I. In a month we shall be man and wife and have a little home of our own. Think of it, darling—in a month!"

Nellie was thinking of it. How could she think of anything else? It seemed altogether too wonderful to her, as it did to him.

No wonder that as they walked towards Cremorne Street in which they both lived

in adjacent houses, that their hearts should be overflowing with happiness, and that their whole beings should be athrill with ecstasy. For this was the greatest moment in their lives.

Who would have thought that that happiness was to be so short-lived? Who would have dreamt that the beautiful leaves of hope growing in their hearts, were almost immediately to be uprooted in the bud by a cruel frost of Fate?

Yet so it was to be! Reaching Cremorne Street, and approaching the house where Bert himself lived—which was a few doors before they could reach Nellie's lodgings—they caught sight of two broad-shouldered men standing outside beneath a lamp-post.

"Why, if it isn't Detective-Inspector Conover, of Scotland Yard!" exclaimed the young taxi-driver. "He came to see me yesterday about that poor gent I drove, and who died at Marble Arch."

"What's he come again for, Bert?" asked Nellie with a shudder, for the memory on the tragedy of which her sweetheart had been a witness, filled her with a nameless dread.

"I don't know. Probably to remind me about the inquest to-morrow. Not that I'd forgotten that, of course."

"Good evening, inspector!" he added in a louder tone as he stepped forward.

"Ah, it's Albert Moy isn't it?"

"Right, sir! Want to see me?"

"I do, on most important business!" Conover's tone was curiously dry as he had turned to the other police officer who was with him. "Albert Moy, you know I am a police officer. It is my duty to tell you that I hold a warrant for your arrest!"

"My arrest!" gasped the young fellow, starting back. "What have I done? Whatever charge have you against me?"

"The charge of being concerned in the murder of the man who you drove from Euston to Edgware Road, three nights ago!"

"Murder—was it murder?"

"You'd better not ask questions. I have to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you!"

"What do I care, when I'm innocent? Innocent, I say!" thundered the young fellow, and turned to the girl who had gone deadly pale and stood transfixed with horror.

"Nellie, Nellie darling! You know that I'm innocent, don't you?"

"Yes—yes, Bert, I know that it is quite impossible—"

She said no more. Horrified grief held her tongue-tied and gripped her brain as in an icy clamp. She reeled where she stood. Then with an awful moan she fell forward in a dead swoon!

"Here's a nice to-do!" exclaimed Conover, as he stepped forward with Bert Moy to her aid. "Who is this young lady?"

"My sweetheart!" replied the young fellow huskily. "We are to be married in a month! Nellie, Nellie darling! Speak to me—speak to me!"

He bent down and kissed her pale cheek, seized her hands and kissed them, too, the while the tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Come," said Conover, touched by his

terrible grief. "This won't do. Where does she live?"

"Four doors away!"

"That's lucky, Ferris"—this to his companion—"go to that house four doors away and tell them what's happened. We must get the poor girl indoors at once."

Detective Ferris did his bidding. In two or three minutes out came Mrs. Wilson, the landlady, and her daughter, in a state of the greatest distress.

Gently they lifted Nellie up between them and started to carry her indoors. Bert Moy, all wild-eyed and distraught, started after them. Inspector Conover caught him fairly by the arm.

"You mustn't go!" he said.

"But you'll let me wait until she recovers?" begged young Moy, with a sob.

"Impossible! It's dead against regulations! You're my prisoner. You must come along with me!"

CHAPTER 4.

Sexton Blake has Doubts.

PREFERRING to walk to the Coroner's Court the next morning, Sexton Blake started off with Tinker in good time.

Overnight he had given a good deal of thought to the mysterious double tragedy. While he could at present form no very complete theory in regard to it, he had come to one conclusion. This was that the two deaths were in some manner connected with each other, that the two men must have been murdered by two other men acting in collusion. Beyond that he could not at present go. Motives, and the real nature of the collusion, must wait to be dealt with pending further developments.

Further developments were to come quickly and to take quite an unexpected turn.

Reaching Oxford Street, the sight and sound of rushing newsboys at once assailed their eyes and ears.

"Arrest in the Marble Arch Mystery Case—paper!" came the cry, and in a moment Blake had secured a newspaper.

"Here's a go!" he exclaimed as he looked at it. "Whom do you think Inspector Conover's arrested? Albert Moy!"

"The taxi-driver! Great Scott! Had he anything to do with it? What does it say?"

"It gives no details. It's only a brief paragraph. It merely says that Moy was arrested late last night on returning from a theatre with his sweetheart, Nellie Milton. It was a very painful scene apparently. She was a witness of his arrest, and fainted on hearing the charge against him. No wonder, poor girl! They had arranged last night to be married in a month!"

"But what can they have against Moy, sir?" asked Tinker. "Can he have murdered the man he drove in his cab?"

"I should say not on the face of things. And, anyway, he could have had nothing to do with the death of the other man who was murdered in precisely the same way. But it's too early to express a definite opinion.

Perhaps Inspector Conover will be able to enlighten us presently?"

But when a few minutes later they met the Scotland Yard man at the Coroner's Court, they found him in a triumphant, rather than a confidential mood.

"So you're surprised at the arrest, eh, Mr. Blake?" he said when the latter questioned him on the subject. "I don't wonder at it. I don't suppose you thought Albert Moy had anything to do with it?"

"I certainly didn't. Did you?"

"Well, I had my suspicions right from the start," responded Conover, assuming a look of preternatural shrewdness. "And last night I obtained certain information that proves conclusively he was connected with the murder!"

"Conclusive information!" echoed Blake. "What is it?"

"You'll hear presently when Mr. Francis Gulwood gives his evidence."

"Mr. Francis Gulwood! Who is he?"

"My new witness! A very important witness, too, as you'll soon agree!"

And Conover's eyes twinkled more triumphantly than ever as he moved away to another part of the court. He was beating Blake! He had made the first arrest, and he was hugely pleased with himself.

"Wonder who this Francis Gulwood is, and what he's got to say?" Blake murmured to Tinker.

But, of course, Tinker couldn't say, and they must needs possess themselves in patience till the witness in question went into the box.

A buzz of sympathetic interest passed through the court as a young girl, very pretty, but looking deathly pale, entered.

"It's Nellie Milton, Moy's sweetheart!" murmured Blake as the whisper went round.

"Poor girl, how heartbroken she looks."

And indeed the sight of poor Nellie was enough to touch all hearts.

The proceedings began. Police and other witnesses told the story of the double tragedy, the details of which are already known to the reader. Then Albert Moy—who in his role of an arrested man was told he need not give evidence unless he chose, but elected to do so—told of how he had driven the well-dressed man from Euston Station.

In view of the evidence to be tendered presently, he was closely questioned by the coroner, but resolutely stuck to his previous statement that the man who had afterwards died so suddenly had entered his cab quite alone. No other man had been with him or even spoken to him at the station so far as he knew. Moy gave his evidence clearly enough, but was obviously deeply troubled.

After his evidence came that of Sexton Blake and the doctors, and a sensation passed through the court as they told their respective stories, and made it quite clear that the two dead men had come to their end through foul play!

But the greatest sensation, not only to the general public, but to Blake and Tinker, came when Mr. Francis Gulwood's name was called and he stepped into the box.

As a rule witnesses at inquests are more or less nervous, but there was nothing of that about Mr. Francis Gulwood.

He was utterly and entirely self-possessed, and gave his evidence with the utmost self-assurance. The impression he created was profound when he swore on oath that he had seen a second man enter the cab at Euston, a short, powerfully-built man of swarthy complexion, a foreigner certainly, and a Spaniard as he should suppose.

As he made this statement, Albert Moy looked up in utter incredulity, as if he could not believe his ears. Sexton Blake also looked up in astonishment, and found, somewhat to his further surprise, that Mr. Francis Gulwood was looking at him.

If the coroner was not similarly astonished—he had been warned beforehand of what Mr. Gulwood would say—he was at any rate fully impressed with the tremendous importance of this evidence. It contradicted absolutely the statement made by Albert Moy, and, of course, greatly affected the young taxi-driver's position. He therefore closely pressed the witness with several questions.

"You are quite sure two men got into the cab?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"And you are sure it was Moy's cab they got into?"

"Positive, sir."

"What makes you so certain?"

"I have seen Moy here to-day, and recognise him."

"But you gave information to the police last night, and you were equally confident then?"

"I was. I had seen Moy's photograph in the newspapers, and I instantly identified him from that. I identified the murdered man also in a similar way. An additional point also is that I noticed the dead man was wearing a yellow rose as he walked towards the cab!"

It was a small, but clinching point. The dead man had certainly been wearing a yellow rose, as everyone knew, and it seemed to set the seal of absolute truth on the witness's depositions.

Amid the buzz of excitement that passed through the court, nobody noticed that Mr. Gulwood's last words had affected Albert Moy deeply, and that he was scribbling a note on a slip of paper for reference. Nobody that is, except Sexton Blake. He remarked the action, and inwardly marvelled at it a little. It was well that he did, for the point was to have an important bearing on subsequent events.

There were a few more questions from the coroner, but nothing could shake Mr. Francis Gulwood. He left the box with that sort of look on his face that showed him to be thoroughly satisfied with himself and with the effect of his evidence.

And the effect could only be one—dead against Albert Moy! Nearly everybody in court felt that, the coroner and jury among them.

The former carefully summed up the case,

and the jury retired to consider their verdict. They were absent only a few minutes.

"Are you agreed upon your verdict?" asked an official when they came back.

"We are!" was the foreman's answer.

"What do you find?"

"We find a verdict of wilful murder against a person or persons unknown, and that Albert Moy, the prisoner now in custody, must have been an accessory to the murder of the man who rode in his cab!"

That was all, but it was enough, and it was dreadful! As the verdict was delivered Albert Moy turned with deadly white face towards the girl he loved, and threw out his arms.

"Nellie—Nellie, you don't believe this terrible thing!" he cried.

"Never, dear Bert, oh, never!" answered the distracted girl.

She ran towards him with unflinching trust and love in her eyes, and would have folded him to her breast. But a police-officer stepped between them and gently held her back.

"Sorry, miss, but that can't be allowed!"

"Oh, let me speak with him, let me speak with him just for a moment!" implored the girl, trembling violently.

The policeman looked at the coroner for instructions.

"Take the prisoner away," he said. "And let the young lady speak with him for a minute or two in an adjoining room."

It was the best thing to do, for it saved a painful public scene. The young taxi-driver was led away, while Nellie Milton tottered after him, ready to faint with terror and anguish, but with her faithful heart full of love and trust for the man who had come to such a dreadful plight.

As to Sexton Blake, he went with Inspector Conover into an adjoining room pending a departure from the coroner's court.

"Well, what do you think of it now?" asked the inspector. "Pretty conclusive, Mr. Gulwood's evidence, eh?"

"Absolutely conclusive, if true!" was Blake's answer.

"Why should you doubt it?" asked Conover, his eyebrows going up.

"I don't like Gulwood's face!" was Blake's curious answer.

"Is that the best reason you have for doubting his words?" laughed Conover. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Blake, such a reason might come from a woman rather than from a man of your experience."

"My experience has led me to believe that a man's character is often reflected in his face."

"What character do you give to Mr. Gulwood?" laughed the inspector again, for he felt upon the most excellent terms with himself.

"I needn't go into that, but I fancy he would hardly be flattered if I gave him my impression."

"Well, well, it would only be a matter of opinion, and character-reading from faces isn't an over-exact science. You must admit

that his evidence is awkward for Albert Moy?"

"Very awkward, unless it can be refuted."

"It proves that Moy was an accessory to the crime. It proves also that that Spaniard was the actual murderer!"

"In that case the important thing would be to find the Spaniard!" said Blake a little quizzically.

"I shall make it my business to do so."

"I wish you the best of luck, inspector, but I think you'll fail."

"Oh!" the officer bridled up. "Why do you say that?"

"If I told you, you would only say it was another woman's reason so I won't trouble you with it."

"Perhaps you don't believe in his existence?"

"Frankly, I don't. I'm inclined to believe Albert Moy's word against Mr. Francis Gulwood's."

Inspector Conover shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's a free country, and every man has a right to enjoy his own opinion, however odd it may be. Good-day, Mr. Blake. I'm going after the Spaniard. Time will show which of us is right."

CHAPTER 5.

Nellie Milton Calls on Blake.

ON his way home to Baker Street Blake remained silent, and showed by his manner that he wished to remain so.

Not until they were in their chambers, therefore, did Tinker venture to speak. When at last he did it was to say:

"I say, gov'nor, aren't you on the wrong tack? For my part, I'm inclined to think Inspector Conover's right."

"About what?"

"In believing Mr. Gulwood's evidence about that Spaniard."

"Tut, tut, laddie! I believe the Spaniard to be an entirely mythical personage."

"So you told the inspector, and I can't make it out a bit. If Mr. Gulwood had said a Frenchman or a Prussian or an Englishman I shouldn't have been so much impressed. But a Spaniard seems to me to confirm what you've already discovered in the matter!"

"Indeed! Tell me how?"

"Well, you know that after examining those clothes you said that the dead man must have lived in Buenos Ayres. Now, isn't Buenos Ayres full of Spaniards, and isn't it likely that the dead man may have made an enemy of one of them there, and that the man followed him to England?"

"I thought I followed your line of reasoning, laddie, but I wanted you to tell me actually. It's Conover's line of reasoning as well, and it's good enough in its way. But it's based on false premises. Tinker. It presupposes the presence of a Spaniard in the cab, and that's wrong. I'm pretty sure the Spaniard in question doesn't exist."

"I can't understand why you should say so."

"Gulwood himself told me!" was Blake's startling reply.

"Eh, what?" gasped Tinker, in amazement.

"Oh, not with his glib tongue, laddie. But he told me so with his eyes as plain as anything."

"Do you want to mystify me, guv'nor? You're doing it, anyway. Whatever do you mean by saying he told you with his eyes?"

"I'll explain. When he made that statement about the man in the cab being a Spaniard, I chanced to look up at him, and found, to my surprise, that he was looking at me!"

"Was there much in that?"

"There was. An ordinary witness would have looked at the coroner or jury on giving such a highly important piece of evidence. Instead of that, he looked at me. And in his eyes there was a world of meaning—a suggestion of triumph, as who should say: 'There, Mr. Blake, the man being a Spaniard bears out your preconception of the affair, doesn't it?'"

"Even that wasn't strange, knowing, as he did, that you'd already made up your mind that the murdered man came from Buenos Ayres?"

"Aye: but how did Gulwood know that? That's the point. It's just that that convinced me that Gulwood was telling a faked story! The details about that tailor's tab didn't come out in evidence! It wasn't necessary, and Conover and I had agreed to keep the fact secret till a later time. How, then, did Gulwood get to know about it?"

"I don't know," answered Tinker, with wide-stretched eyes.

"I'll tell you, then. When Conover and I discussed it at the mortuary, we must have been overheard."

"By whom?"

"Either by Gulwood himself or by some spy in his pay!"

"Guv'nor, do you mean that?"

"Most emphatically, I do. Having learnt that I had discovered the man had come from Buenos Ayres, they played their cards accordingly, by inventing an imaginary Spaniard."

"But what would be their object in spying on you and inventing such a tale?"

"To hide their own guilt! Tinker, I believe that Gulwood knows something about these murders!"

"But if he had anything to do with them, why should he have come forward instead of lying low?"

"It was a case of getting the wind up. Realising that I had discovered that tailor's tab, he feared I might discover more. Therefore, he ventured on the bold stroke of coming forward, and trying to fix the guilt on Albert Moy and the mythical Spaniard!"

"Before Tinker could fully take in Blake's last astounding words, or at any rate, make any answer to them, he was interrupted."

A ring came at the street-door bell, and a minute later Mrs. Bardell announced:

"A young lady to see you, sir. Seems to

to be in terrible trouble, she do, sir. Gives her name as Miss Milton!"

"Nellie Milton—young Moy's sweetheart!"

Blake said, with a quick look at Tinker.

"Please, ask her up at once, Mrs. Bardell!"

Nellie came in. She was pale and trembling, and her eyes showed signs of recent bitter tears. With half a sob, she took the chair which Blake kindly placed for her.

"Now, then, Miss Nellie," he said gently, "why have you come to see me?"

"Oh, sir, to ask you to help poor Albert. He told me that you had taken up the case, and that you're so clever that you'll be sure to find out the truth. Oh, sir, I hope you will, for Albert is innocent! I beg you to believe that. He couldn't—couldn't have had anything to do with this terrible crime!"

Blake rose, crossed over to her, and patted her shoulder.

"You need not labour that point, Miss Nellie," he said. "I may tell you right out that I believe in Albert Moy's innocence as firmly as you do yourself."

"Oh, sir, how good of you to say that," she cried, looking up and smiling through her scalding tears. "How can I ever thank you for those kind words? And you will—you will find out the truth?"

"We shall do our very best, believe me. But you must help us. So, my dear young lady, you must dry your eyes and try to be calm. You went to see Albert after the inquest? What did he say to you?"

"He told me that everything that man Gulwood had said was false!"

"Ha! Did he go into details?"

"He said there was no second man got into his cab! There was no foreigner, no Spaniard, no anybody. Only the poor gentleman who afterwards died so suddenly. He said all Gulwood's evidence was false from beginning to end."

"Talking of the end," said Blake. "I noticed that just as Gulwood was completing his statement Albert Moy made a hurried pencil note. Did he happen to mention to you what it was?"

"Oh, yes, he did, sir. It was about the yellow rose."

"Yes, that was it. Why did he make a note about that?"

"Because Gulwood had told an outrageous lie about it!"

"Ha! What was that?"

"Well, sir, he said that he noticed that the dead man was wearing a yellow rose as he walked towards the cab!"

"Yes, I heard him say that, and it was then I noticed Albert Moy got excited and made a rapid note. Wasn't it true?"

"No, sir, it wasn't. Albert told me to tell you. The gentleman wasn't wearing the rose-*he*. He was carrying it in his hand. He didn't pin it into his coat until the cab had started off!"

Sexton Blake jumped out of his chair.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir, Albert is sure of it. He is ready to swear to it."

Her statement had plainly excited Blake, and he seemed about to burst out with

something. But he restrained himself, forced back his calmness again, and asked Nellie a few more questions.

But presently, after letting her out at the front door and returning to the room, the eager, shining of his eyes struck Tinker.

"How excited you got just now, sir," he said. "What made you jump out of your chair as you did?"

"Couldn't you see, laddie? Couldn't you see the deep importance of what Nellie Millton told me? This discrepancy in the evidence about the yellow rose makes it the more certain that Gulwood is engineering a foul conspiracy against young May! In his eagerness to prove his point he proved too much. He has overreached himself, and that may well lead to his own undoing. Now I must get to work."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"Try to find out something about this Francis Gulwood. He poses as a highly respectable man of private means, but I am inclined to think he is less respectable than he pretends to be. If I'm any judge of faces he's a man who lives by his wits. I'm going to try and find out."

"But you've no clue to go on."

"I've got his address. He lives at 18, Randolph Mansions. That's near Kensington Gardens, on the Bayswater side. I'm going to disguise myself and try my luck there first. After that I shall be guided by whatever turns up."

"Am I to come with you, sir?"

"No, laddie. I shall do better alone this journey. I may be away several hours, so you must amuse yourself as well as you can till I return."

Disguised beyond recognition, Blake went out presently, leaving Tinker alone. For a little while the latter sat wondering what he should do to kill time.

"I'll index up the guv'nor's notes," he said to himself, and went to a drawer.

But almost the first note he came to made him change his mind. It was a small slip of paper—the scrap which had been found in the ragged man's pocket, and which had been handed to Blake by Inspector Conover.

"F. L., Wolsey Road, S.E. Ditto, Pennithorne Street, W.C.," Tinker read out; then exclaimed:

"I know what I'll do. I'll go to Wolsey Road and Pennithorne Street, and see if I can find out who the dickens this F. L. is."

He, too, made some changes in his appearance, and then, leaving Pedro, the blood-hound, asleep on the rug, went out on his quest.

Behind his ear was a carefully sharpened pencil, while under his arm was a ruled manuscript book.

He was going to try and discover the identity of "F. L.," and the plan he was going to adopt was to go from door to door in the two streets, canvassing for names and descriptions for an imaginary directory.

It was a somewhat crude and laborious method, but it was the first he thought of, and he hoped it might be effective.

CHAPTER 6.

"F. L."—Who or What is It?

TINKER returned to Baker Street after some four hours' absence, to find Sexton Blake still away.

He was tired, moderately well satisfied, but still very puzzled. He had, it is true, found some sort of answer as to the meaning of "F. L.," but on account of its unexpectedness, felt by no means certain that it was the correct one.

"If it is the right answer, what does it mean? If it isn't the right answer, how on earth is the right answer to be come by?"

Consideration of this complex riddle kept Tinker's wits at work for another hour or more, only to leave him as mystified as ever.

"Oh, well," he said, at last, "I must tell the guv'nor about it when he comes in, and see what he thinks. I can't make head or tail of it. When's he coming back, I wonder?"

He had some time to wait, for it was past ten o'clock ere Blake returned.

"Back at last, laddie," he exclaimed, dropping into an armchair. "Had the deuce of a job to find out anything about our friend Francis Gulwood."

"But you succeeded at last, sir? I can see it in your eye."

"Right, Tinker, right. Francis Gulwood is about as choice a specimen of the adventurer as we've run against for some time. He's been many things in turn. He's been a race-course lumberer, a cardsharp, and a swell-mobman. It will show you the kind of beauty he is when I tell you he is known among his pals at the Bracelet Club as 'Fly Frankie.'"

"Gee whiz! But what's the Bracelet Club?"

"A gambling-den off Shaftesbury Avenue. Its members are nearly all ex-convicts, as its name implies. I've been there to-night. Got taken there by an old convict to whom I did a good turn some years ago."

"And you saw Gulwood there? Did you learn anything?"

"Not about the Martine Arch affair. He and his pals were quite mum as to that. But I heard quite enough of their talk to tell me that they all live by their wits. Gulwood's got some plot in hand just now, but I can't quite make out what it is. I fancy it's something to do with racing, but I can't be sure. We may find that out to-morrow at Gathury."

"Are you going there?"

"Yes. I heard Gulwood telephone to somebody saying he'd meet him there to-morrow at one o'clock to discuss details."

"Details of what?"

"That's what we've to find out. That's why we're going down. I've the strongest suspicions of Gulwood, and I'm determined to keep my eye on him till I find out what his game is. That's all I can tell you to-night, laddie. It isn't much, perhaps, but we've got a line, and we may find out something really important if we follow it up."

"I've got something to tell you, sir," said

Tinker, who, having listened intently to Blake, was now hurrying to tell his own news. "I've been on the warpath, too."

"What doing?"

"Hunting for F. L."

"F. L.—F. L.? Oh, I know; the chap mentioned on that slip of paper. Found out anything?"

"Well, yes. But F. L. isn't a chap."

"Ho—ho, a woman, eh?"

"Nor a woman, either. F. L. doesn't mean a person at all, as far as I can make out."

"Then what does it mean?"

"It stands for Free Library."

"Free Library?" echoed Blake, in amazement.

"Of course, F. L. are the right initials, but what on earth can a free library have to do with the business?"

"Ask me another, sir. I've puzzled my brain over the matter till I've got come on it. All I know is there's a free library in Wolsey Road, S.E., and another in Pennithorne Street, W.C. Not, perhaps, that there's anything very remarkable in that."

"Oh, but there is," replied Blake thoughtfully. "There are thousands of streets and made in London, and only a few dozen free libraries between them. I'm inclined to think it is rather remarkable, and that F. L. does mean what you say."

"But what can that poor, dead outcast have to do with free libraries?"

"I don't know—yet. If we can find that out, we may make another step forward in the elucidation of this tangle. It needs thinking out."

Blake slowly filled his pipe and lit it. Then as, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, he puffed cloud on cloud upward, his brain, keen as a scalpel, set to dissecting the problem which Tinker had set before him. In five minutes he banged the arm of his chair.

"Of course, of course, that must be it. It's as plain as a pike-staff."

"What is, sir?"

"Why, that ragged man should have used the free libraries. He went there to study the agony columns in the newspapers."

"The agony columns?"

"Yes, to watch for advertisements from the other man in Buenos Ayres. They probably first got into touch by that means. Having got into touch, they may have continued that means of communication until they were able to get at one another by more direct means."

"Sounds likely enough, now you point it out, sir. Wonder, if we showed the library people the ragged man's photograph, whether they'd remember ever having seen him there?"

"That's a suggestion worth trying a little later on. To-morrow we must get down to Clabury to try and find out what 'Fry Frankie's' game is! But it's getting lateish, so we'd better get to bed."

They retired to their rooms, and were very soon fast asleep. That sleep was, however, to be interrupted after about two hours!

When at about one o'clock in the morning, the mighty city was at its quietest and the

house in Baker Street lay shrouded in darkness and silence, something happened to startle the sleeping inmates into instant wakefulness.

A loud ringing came at the street door bell!

CHAPTER 7.

Things Take a Startling Turn.

FEW things are more dramatic than the ringing of the bell of a dark and silent house "in the stillness of the sleptime."

At sound of it, both Sexton Blake and Tinker started awake, jumped out of bed, and, throwing on their dressing-gowns and slippers, hurried from their rooms.

"Who can it be, sir?" asked Tinker, as they met on the landing.

"We must see," replied Blake, and hurried downstairs.

Unbolting the door he threw it open, and then fell back a step in amazement. For a policeman stood there, half supporting with one arm the deathly-pale face of a boy in uniform.

"Good heavens, what's the matter, constable?" Blake asked.

"Sorry to disturb you at such a time, sir, but it's important. This boy is a messenger connected with the Cosmopolitan Cable Company. He had a message in his pouch to bring to you!"

"Ah, yes! Where is it?"

"It's been stolen from him, sir."

"Stolen? Come, tell me exactly what has happened. You tell me, my boy! At what time did you start out with the message?"

"Just before eight o'clock last night, sir," replied the messenger.

"And it's now one o'clock—five hours ago! Well—well, what happened?"

"I'd got to this spot, sir, and was just about to ring the bell, when a closed motor-car dashes up just as it was getting dark. Two men hopped out of it, and before I knew where I was, I was smuggled into the motor-car and driven away. I knew nothing more till the policeman found me half an hour ago in Regent's Park!"

"In Regent's Park?"

"Yes, sir," said the constable, taking up the tale. "Over beyond the Zoo I found him, lying among some bushes not far from the canal bank. He'd been drugged, evidently, and was just coming to when I came upon him. Anyway, it was a mean that made me climb the rails and see what was amiss. I gave him a drink of cold tea out of my can, and that pulled him together a bit. He told me what had happened, and that a message intended for you had been stolen. I came on at once, thinking the message might be important!"

"Thank you, constable, it is important. It was I suspect, an answer to a cablegram I had sent to Buenos Ayres. Is your office still open, my boy?"

"Yes, sir. Open all night," answered the messenger.

"Good! Then, Tinker, go along to

Bishopsgate Street at once, explain what has happened to their messenger, and ask them for a duplicate of the message. I'd go myself, but I must get along to Regent's Park."

"What for, sir?" inquired Tinker, as he got ready to depart.

"To try, with Pedro's help, to get on the trail of the rascals who attacked this boy. You see how important it is? It shows that the villains knew of my cabling to Buenos Ayres, and were very anxious to get hold of the reply. It establishes the fact that this is an organised plot. If we can discover the villains who drugged the messenger, it may lead to the solution of the double tragedy at Marble Arch!"

"Good gracious, sir!" gasped the constable. "Has this affair any bearing on that?"

"I think so. Wait a little while I get my bloodhound; then take me to the spot where you found the boy."

Regent's Park is at no great distance from Baker Street, and they were quickly at the spot near the canal bank where the messenger-boy had been found. But, although Blake worked hard and Pedro scoured all round to get on the scent, they could strike no definite trail.

Nor could the boy give any but a hazy description of his assailants. It had been getting dark at the moment of the attack, and beyond the fact that both men were of powerful build and of respectable dress, he had noted nothing further.

Very reluctantly they had to abandon the search, and, having arranged with the constable to see the boy safely home, Blake returned to Baker Street.

Tinker had just returned, and handed Blake the duplicate message which he had brought from the Cosmopolitan Cable Company's office.

"Yes as I thought," said Blake, as he tore it open. "It's from Manuel Salvadoes, the Buenos Ayres tailor!"

"What does he say?"

"He remembers the stitching of the tab inside the lining of the trousers quite well. It was done, as I surmised, because the man who ordered the clothes aroused the tailor's suspicions by giving strict orders not to label them with the maker's name in any way."

"Does he give the man's name, sir?"

"He does—Bernard Ullewick! He was more or less a stranger in Buenos Ayres, but the tailor understood he had lived in Peru before going to the Argentine."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more. Still, this is pretty good to go on with. We've established that the well-dressed man went by the name of Bernard Ullewick, and that's something. More than that, this attack on the messenger points plainly to the existence of an organised gang. Their desperate anxiety to get hold of the message proves that they fear us."

"But how did they know you were likely to receive a message?"

"One of the gang must have heard me tell Inspector Conover at the mortuary of

my intention to cable out to Buenos Ayres."

"Think it was Francis Gulwood?"

"It may have been. Anyway, it makes me all the more keen on watching him. So back to bed again, laddie, so as to be ready in the morning to go down to Gatsby."

CHAPTER 8.

Scoundrels in Confidence!

WHETHER Sexton Blake was right in suspecting Mr. Francis Gulwood of complicity in the terrible double tragedy at Marble Arch remains to be seen. That the famous detective's general estimate of his character was correct may be admitted right away.

Gulwood—as his nickname of "Fly Frankie" indicated—lived by his wits, and lived remarkably well. He was an adventurer of adventurers, a brainy rogue absolutely without scruple, and full of cunning and resource. At the same time, while he associated with various types belonging to the criminal scum of the earth, his bearing and address assured for him, whenever he cared to assert himself, the entree to far less disreputable circles of society.

On occasions, he might be seen riding in Rotten Row, or dining at a company banquet with City magnates. At other times, he could be found in the lobby of the House of Commons, hobnobbing with M.P. acquaintances (who, of course, were ignorant of the other side of his character), and using parliamentary note-paper to his heart's content.

It was indeed his friendship with so many people of influence and undoubted respectability that had kept him clear of the suspicious of the police, and enabled him to carry on his many nefarious designs without interference from the law. How can you suspect a man of being a common criminal when you find him dining with my Lord Tomnoddy one evening, and cracking jokes with the Honourable Member for 'Slow-borough-on-the-Slush' the next?

All the same Gulwood was a common criminal and full of all sorts of common criminal plots and plans. It was one of these that he had in hand at the present, and which was taking him down to Gatsby Races, where he intended to be present the full three days.

He started off in good time the next morning in a swaggar car, which he hired by the week and which was driven by one Josh Perkins, who acted as chauffeur and also made himself generally useful to Gulwood in the prosecution of his many criminal plans.

"Let her rip, Josh," he said, when they had drawn clear of central London and reached the quieter suburbs. "We've a good forty miles to go this way."

"Well, racing don't begin till two o'clock, so there's no hurry, boss," answered Perkins, with the familiarity he adopted when he was alone with Gulwood.

Only when strangers were present did he pay deference to him.

"I want to be done there an hour before that," Gulwood replied. "I've arranged to meet Matt Fosterton at one o'clock!"

"The Leviathan bookie!" exclaimed Perkins. "What sort o' stunt have you got on with him?"

"One that I hope to make a nice bit of money out of. You'll hear all about it later. I shall most likely want your help."

"Right-o! I'm ready and willin', providin' I stand in. I can do with some brass. The exchequer's gettin' uncomfortable low."

"If you want to make some ready money, back Prince Garnet for the Gathbury Cup to-morrow. You'll get twenty to one if you get on to-day."

"Prince Garnet!" repeated Perkins, as, sitting side by side, they sped along. "He don't stand an earthly. Swiftwing'll win the Cup in a back canter. He's been backed down to evens and is a raging hot favourite. And the money's come from the right quarter, too."

"I know all about that. But you can take it from me that Swiftwing won't win. Its odds against his going to the post. Back Prince Garnet and help yourself to a nice little parcel!"

And Gulwood gave such a cunning wink as brought a broad grin to the chauffeur's face.

"So that's your game, is it, boss? That's the game you've got on with Matt Fosterton?"

"Don't ask questions now. You'll hear all about it later, when I've settled details. Get a move on!"

Perkins accelerated his speed and the conversation lapsed. Approaching the little town of Gathbury, which they reached by an unaccustomed road, Gulwood changed his seat so as not to be seen beside the chauffeur.

Entering Gathbury Park, he presently alighted, and, quitting the car, made for a line of stables behind the paddock. As he rounded the corner, a big, stout man with a very red face and neck came hurrying towards him. His eyes had a worried look in them, and he was fidgeting his heavy gold watch-chain nervously. It was the bookmaker whom Gulwood had arranged to meet.

"Hallo, Matt; here first, then?"

"Yes, I've been waiting for you some time. I'm dead anxious about Swiftwing."

"Why worry? I told you over the 'phone last night not to."

"All very well. But my book's chock full up with money for him. If he wins I stand to lose forty thousand pounds, and that'll ruin me."

"Well, he won't win!" replied Gulwood easily.

"So you've said all along, and, of course, that's what I've been banking on. But here we are within twenty-four hours of the race and nothing's been done. The money keeps rolling in for Swiftwing, and I'm getting scared!"

"Keep on taking it—keep on laying against him! A lot can be done in twenty-four hours!"

"I don't know so much. I'm told that

Swiftwing's closely guarded day and night, and that it's impossible for a stranger to get near him. That being so, the question is how are you going to nobble him?"

"Who said I was going to nobble him?" asked Gulwood, with a smile. "I've got a better plan than that."

"Have you? What is it?"

"Well, you know who's down to ride him?"

"Con Battle, the Irish jockey. He's ridden him in all his races—as everybody knows."

"For a very good reason. Swiftwing's one of the queerest-tempered horses in training, and Con Battle's the only man who can get him to give his true running. The horse refuses even to face the starting-gate with anybody else on his back."

"Yes, I've heard that," said the bookmaker, nodding.

"Well, what we've got to do is to get hold of Con Battle, smuggle him away, and keep him shut up till after the race is run to-morrow!"

"Jeboshaphat! Do you mean that?"

"Certainly. It's out and away the best plan. Directly the owner finds that Con Battle is missing, he'll scratch Swiftwing most likely. Even if he doesn't, and decides to run him with another jockey up, the horse will stand no chance."

"I can see that. But how are you going to get hold of Con Battle?" asked the bookmaker, his greedy eyes bulging.

"Leave that to me! I happen to know that Battle is staying, during the three days meeting, over with some friends at Fremington. That's a village some six miles from here. He always stays there when there's racing at Gathbury, and he always rides to and fro on a borrowed hack."

"Well?"

"Well, to get to Fremington, he has to pass Lonewood Corner. Lonewood Corner is a very lonely spot where four roads meet. Few people ever go that way, and it is surrounded by dense woods on every side."

"You intend to do in Con Battle there?" asked Fosterton, with a shudder of his huge frame.

"Who said anything about doing him in? I intend to have him waylaid there and kept prisoner till after to-morrow, that's all. Now do you see?"

"I tumble. But I say, Frankie, this isn't your sort of job!"

"Oh, I'm not going to do it myself, you bet!" answered Gulwood, with a grin. "I'm going to fix up with Jem Pylash and Chib Belsheer to do it!"

"A couple of as choice bruisers as you could pick for such a job. Now what have I got to do?"

"Go on laying against Swiftwing for all you're worth."

"I've done that already," answered the bookmaker drily. "If anything should go wrong, I'm a ruined man."

"Nothing will go wrong, I'll see to that! Keep on laying against him. It's money

for nothing all the time. I doubt if Swiftwing will even be saddled for the race! So-long, for the present!"

They separated, Matt Fosterton to take up his position in one of the betting rings, and Francis Gulwood to go and complete arrangements for his nefarious plan!

Thirty seconds after they had moved away, a youth, clad in Bedford cord breeches and leather leggings issued from one of the stalls in the line of stables within six yards of where they had been standing.

A stable-lad to all appearances, who had ostensibly been engaged in attending to one of the horses. But, in actual fact, he was not a stable-lad at all. He was no other than Tinker!

There was a very grave look on his face as he hurried across to a spot where he knew that Sexton Blake would be awaiting him.

His grave look was not difficult to account for. He had overheard nearly everything that had been said:

Sexton Blake, admirably made-up with false moustache, well-fitting wig and other disguising touches, and wearing a Newmarket coat with a pair of race-glasses slung over his shoulder, was in a quiet corner of the stand adjoining Tatterad's Ring.

At Tinker's approach he looked up eagerly. His brows knit as he listened to the story the young fellow had to tell.

"So that's Gulwood's game, to kidnap Swiftwing's jockey, is it?"

"Yes, sir. Now that we know it, I suppose you'll take steps to have Gulwood arrested?"

"No, laddie, I certainly sha'n't. That would spoil everything!"

"How?"

"Don't you see, this Swiftwing business is a minor affair. It's serious enough, of course, but, after all, it's only a side issue. What we want is to find out Gulwood's connection with the Marble Arch murders. If we arrest him over this racing job, it'll put him on his guard, and it'll be good-bye to our discovering anything about the more serious affair!"

"Yes, I see that, sir," replied Tinker thoughtfully. "But, anyway, you'll put Con Battle, the jockey, on his guard so that he can change his plans?"

"No; I sha'n't do that either, because that would open Gulwood's eyes to the fact that his plot had been discovered. No; I shall let things take their course!"

"Good heavens! What about the poor jockey?"

"No great harm will come to him. You have just told me that Gulwood said that himself. Con Battle is not to be injured. He is just to be smuggled away somewhere and kept prisoner till after the race for the Gatsby Cup."

"But think of the thousands of pounds that'll be lost if Swiftwing doesn't run!"

"I didn't say he wouldn't run. He will run. What's more he will win if he can—on his merits!"

"But according to Gulwood he stands no chance unless Con Battle rides him. How can Battle ride him if you allow them to carry out their plan?"

"Tut-tut, laddie! I shall let them carry out their plan up to a point, so as not to let Gulwood know we have discovered it. But beyond that point I shall not allow them to go."

"You puzzle me altogether. I don't understand a bit what you're driving at."

"Wait a little while," answered Blake confidently. "You'll understand everything in good time. Now, then, come with me, we must keep our eye on Gulwood, and also on these two villainous bruisers whom he's going to get to do the job!"

"Why, there is Gulwood!" whispered Tinker, pointing to a far corner just outside the Silver Ring. "And he's talking to a couple of ruffians now."

"Yes, they must be Jim Pylash and Chib Belsher. Well go across there and see if we can find out anything more!"

CHAPTER 9.

The Adventure at Lonswood Corner.

RACING was over for the day, and Con Battle, mounted on a hired hack, was riding from the racecourse to the house of his relatives at Framlington, with whom, as Francis Gulwood had said, he always stayed during the Gatsby meetings.

Very cheerful and lighthearted was Con, for he had had a good day. He had only had two mounts, but he had won on both. He could have ridden in more races had he pleased, but he was saving himself for the big event to-morrow—the valuable Gatsby Cup, which he hoped to win for Sir Philip Gering, on his handicap horse Swiftwing.

He particularly liked to win races for Sir Philip, if only because he had served his apprenticeship in the stables of which the wealthy baronet was chief patron, and because Sir Philip had given him his first chance on the turf, and had ever since helped him to rise to his present eminent position as a horseman.

Con had never so far been champion jockey by riding the highest number of winners during one season. But he had done well so far this year, and was ambitious to top the list by the time flat racing was over. Being quite young, and, moreover, one of the very straightest jockeys riding, Con's ambition was a laudable one, and most of those who knew him hoped that he might achieve it.

To win on Swiftwing on the morrow would be another feather in his cap, especially as the horse was of a very queer temper, and had of recent months refused to put his heart into his work for any other jockey than Con himself.

"I ought to win on him," he thought to himself, as he trotted easily along. "Swiftwing's awkward-tempered, but I know how to wheedle him into doing his best, and he's just about as fit as hands can make him."

"Why, auto, Timothy, what's wrong with you?"

This to the hack, who, after going quietly for the best part of three miles, had suddenly stilled, swerved round, and reared up on his hind legs in a way that would certainly have dislodged a less expert horseman than Con!

"There—there," said the jockey, leaning forward and patting his neck soothingly. "Did you hear me talking about Swiftwing's queer temper, and wish to show that you had a queer temper, too?"

But it wasn't temper on Timothy's part, as Con Battle at once saw when he faced him round again. It was very natural fright at a quite unnatural and unexpected obstacle!

For they had arrived at Lonewood Corner, and had just turned to the left, to find stretched across the narrow road between the frowning woods a twisted strand of stout barbed wire, about the height of the horse's breast!

"Good heavens! Here's a game!" gasped Con in amazement. "Lucky it wasn't dark, or we'd both have been over, and perhaps broken our necks. Wonder who's done this, and why they've done it? I must dismount, old chap, and raise the wire so that you can get through!"

He was out of the saddle in a moment, and, with one hand on the bridle, he put out the other to raise the barbed wire.

As he did so, the sound of rushing footsteps made him half turn round.

Too late! Before he could properly turn, two brutal-looking ruffians were right on him. One wrenched his hand free of the bridle, while the other, holding a sack, forced it over his head and shoulders in a moment, and had him prisoner in no time.

Before poor Con could do more than utter a muffled cry, his voice was stifled by the sack being pressed across his mouth. It reeked of some sickly drug, the first breath of which caused a buzzing in the jockey's ears. A second intake of the fumes and his senses swam, and in another moment he had swooned in the arms of one of his brutal attackers!

"That's all right!" muttered Jem Pylash, thrusting out his big brutal jaw. "Took his physic like a perditional 'ospital lead-swinger, and went off sweet and quiet! 'Taint likely anybody'll be comin' along, but I'll get him out o' sight in case!"

Lifting his burden as though the jockey were a mere featherweight, the ex-pugilist forced his way through the hedge, and placed the unconscious horseman on the ground amid the trees. Then he went back into the road, where his companion was holding Timothy by the bridle.

"What are we goin' to do with the 'orse?" he asked.

"Take him along with us till to-morrow, Chib. Arter that we can get rid of him to the diddicoy. There's plenty of 'em knocking about now the races is on. Take him through the gap there while I gets this wire out of the way."

While Belsheer led the hack through, Pylash rolled up the length of barbed-wire,

and hid it away in a coil in a ditch near by. Then, going back to the spot where he had placed Con Battle, he gathered him up in his arms again, and, followed by his companion leading the horse, pushed on through the dense wood.

They evidently knew well the way to go, for they went on unhesitatingly by various winding paths. The trees and undergrowth grew thickly for a considerable distance, but, having traversed about the third of a mile, the men came suddenly upon a small clearing.

On the further edge of this, and overhung by trees at the back, was a cluster of tumble-down buildings, constructed mainly of wood. They were unoccupied now, and rapidly sinking to decay, but in former years the cottage at the end had served as a gamekeeper's house, while the outbuildings had served as stables and shelter for members of shooting and hunting-parties who might by chance stray to so remote a spot.

Like men who had carefully reconnoitred the ground beforehand, Chib Belsheer at once made for one of the stables with the hack, while Pylash carried Con Battle into the cottage. There, on a heap of straw in a small, dark room at the back, he removed the sack from his and placed him down.

"Not goin' to leave him like that, are yer, Jim?" asked Belsheer, entering the room. "He might kick up a shindy when he comes to."

"That ain't likely when he spots us a-lookin' arter him."

"But I don't know as we particular wants to look arter him continuous. O' course, we're agoin' to keep a gen'ral eye on him, so to speak, but I don't see no sense in tyin' ourselves to this spot, when if I recollect right, there's a nice little pub along the road yonder, about a mile away."

"Quite right, there is, Chib. I noticed it myself 's we passed," replied Pylash thirstily.

"Very well, then. Ain't a cosy corner in a pub a better place to pass the evenin' than a scooper-coated sort o' shootin'-box like this?"

"It is, Chib; it is—most undoubted it is," replied Pylash regretfully, "only, yer see, Boss Gulwood's horders to us was to keep a strict eye on Con Battle, and under no circumstances to give him a chance to 'op it."

"We ain't goin' to give him no chance, Jem. We're agoin' to truse his wrists and ankles up with some cord, and fasten a muzzle acrost his jaw, so as when he do come to, he can neither do a guy nor indulge in chin-music. Then that'll leave us free to go and wet our whistle and indulge in a little convivial society."

"Right-ho! So it will, Chib, so it will. Where's the cord?"

"Here we are, ole sport! We'll have him trussed up in a brace o' shakes!"

Like men who had done such evil work before, they tied the unconscious jockey's ankles together, and made his wrists fast behind his back. Then, having fastened a gag over his mouth, they quitted the tumble-down cottage, and struck out through the

now dark wood towards the roadside tavern they had noticed on their way.

Thus was the jockey made a prisoner, and thus far had Gulwood's rascally plot succeeded.

Now, Sexton Blake had, as we know, been forewarned of that plot, yet he had up to now done nothing to frustrate it!

What was the meaning of the great detective's inactivity? Where was he now? Were Francis Gulwood and his co-conspirators to be allowed to carry their villainous plan through, and net thousands of pounds by it; or what was to be the outcome of it all?

We shall see!

CHAPTER 10.

The Race for the Gathbury Cup.

IT was the second day of the Gathbury meeting—Cup Day—and, big as the crowd had been yesterday, it was swelled into far greater proportions now.

Two races had already been run, and the "Big Race"—with nearly an hour's interval between—was the next on the card.

Since business had begun, Francis Gulwood had several times dodged across to Matt Posterton to reassure him as to the successful progress of the plot. Now, as the time for the big event drew near, he dodged across again with a greater show of evil triumph than ever.

"It's all right, Matt," he whispered. "Everything's gone swimmingly. They've been looking for Con Battle everywhere, but of course they'll never find him."

"Hope they won't," returned the bookmaker dismally enough. "If anything went wrong now, it would mean the workhouse for me. I've been layin' against Swiftwing heavier than ever!"

"Good! Go on doing it; the more the better!"

"But supposing Con Battle should turn up, after all?"

"Now, Matt, don't get the wind up: there's no need! Haven't I told you that Battle's in safe custody? Pylish and Belsher will keep tight hold of him till to-night; you can bet. It's odds against Swiftwing going to the post. I caught sight of Sir Philip Goring, the owner, just now, and blamed worried he was looking. I can tell you, I expect he'll wait till the last minute to see if Con Battle does turn up, and when he finds he doesn't, he'll decide not to run his horse!"

"We shall soon know that, anyway, for here comes the chap shoutin' the numbers," said Posterton.

And, indeed, at that moment there came a hurrying man, winding his way among the crowd in the ring, and shouting the numbers of the competitors in the big race.

"Two—three—" he called out. "Five down to eight. Ten—leven—twelve. Fifteen—sixteen—nineteen—twenty—twenty-three, and twenty-four!"

"Number six goes!" gasped Matt Foster-

ton, with a quick look at his card. "That's Swiftwing! He does run, after all!"

"Oh, no," asserted Gulwood. "Of course, his number's shouted because he's in the list of expected runners. Sir Philip Goring's sure to wait till the last minute before withdrawing him. There's a good twenty minutes yet before the race, and you'll see his name won't go up in the number-board."

"They're just starting to put the numbers up!" said the bookmaker, turning his eyes anxiously towards the big frame some little distance away, "so we shall soon see."

Numbers two, three, and five went up, and with almost still heart he watched for the next.

"Six!" he groaned. "Swiftwing! You're wrong about him. They're running him, after all!"

Gulwood seemed surprised for a moment, but recovered his equanimity as he, too, gazed at the number-board.

"Yes, they're running him," he said, with a laugh. "But see who's riding him!"

"I—I can't read the name!"

"Nor anybody else with the naked eye at this distance," replied Gulwood, laughing again as he looked through his binoculars. "It's a chalk jockey! Haven't got a painted board for him. An unknown apprentice kid named Sholler."

"Whew! You're right!" said Posterton, with his race-glasses up now. "My word, but it did give me a turn! I thought Con Battle must have turned up, after all."

"No fear of that! The only alternative to withdrawing the horse was to run him with this unknown kid up. They might as well keep Swiftwing out altogether, for the youngster won't be able to do anything with him. He's no boy's horse, that's certain. Everybody knows that. Hark how Swiftwing's going back in the betting already. A few minutes ago he was at evens, and looked like being odds on. Now he's drifted out to threes!"

It was true! The discovery that, instead of Con Battle, an unknown apprentice was to ride the favourite, had caused something like a panic among those who had backed him at even money, and considerable jubilation among the bookmakers who had laid him at that price. Plainly, they thought as Gulwood did, that the alteration of jockey meant good-bye to his chance of winning, and they were signifying their belief in the usual way.

"Three to one the field—three to one Swiftwing!" they shouted. "Here, come on, some of you punters; I don't care! Four to one Swiftwing!"

And the cry quickly spread all over the ring, till in a few minutes Sir Philip Goring's horse was deposed from the proud position of favourite, which he had occupied ever since the opening of the betting lists a week or two before.

This, of course, afforded Matt Posterton an excellent opportunity of "hedging" over Swiftwing on most advantageous terms. That is to say, by using some of the money he had taken from backers at evens, in

order to back Swiftwing at three or four to one against, he could have stood to win, whether that horse came in first or not. This the bookmaker seemed half inclined to do, but Gulwood stopped him.

"Don't hedge a ha'penny," he advised. "Stick to all the money you've got, and go on laying against him at any price. With Battle on his back he would have been a certainty, but with this apprentice up—"

He broke off, attracted by a sudden murmuring among the crowd, followed by a cheer from a section of them.

"What's up?" he asked. "What are they doing to the number-board?"

Matt Fosterton had already got his field-glasses fixed on the board. They were trembling violently in his hand.

"It's Swiftwing's jockey they're altering," came hoarsely from him, while the beads of perspiration began to form on his brow.

"Eh, what?" panted the other, his glasses up likewise.

"Great heaven! Con Battle rides after all!" panted Fosterton.

"Impossible! He can't! Thunder and lightning! He does, though! What can have happened?"

Gulwood stood still, appalled for the moment. Then, with trembling lips, he turned on Fosterton.

"Something's gone wrong with our plans. Con Battle's turned up, after all."

"I told you we ought to have hedged!" groaned the bookmaker.

"Well, do it now!"

"It's too late! Swiftwing's back at even money, and everybody's going for him. Too late—too late! He'll win, and we shall both be ruined!"

"Not if I know it!" gasped Gulwood, and, white to the lips, he dashed out of the ring towards the paddock!

How was it that Con Battle had thus turned up at the last minute? Simply because Sexton Blake and Tinker had rescued him from the gamekeeper's cottage, brought him back to consciousness, and motored him back to the racecourse just in time.

Even now, while Battle was changing into his jockey clothes and preparing to weigh out, Blake was explaining to the previously distracted Sir Philip Goring what had happened, explaining how he had overheard the plot against the jockey, and how afterwards he had been a witness of the attack on him at Lonewood Corner.

"I know you must have had a good reason, Mr. Blake," the baronet said. "But may I ask why you didn't take steps to frustrate the attack?"

"Because, if I had, the scoundrels who worked this plan would have carried out some other, and so achieved their end. It was better to let them go on in ignorance of my suspecting them. Having learnt where Con Battle was hidden away, I knew I could rescue him this morning and bring him here in time. This I did in the absence of his villainous gaolers, who had gone down to a public-house a mile or so away."

"I follow you. Anyway, you've brought Battle back in time, and I'm deeply grateful. Are you taking steps to get these villains arrested?"

"Not yet, Sir Philip. I've a very much graver charge against their principal, and I don't want to put him on the guard till I've got proof of his guilt in regard to that."

"Then you are taking no immediate steps?"

"No. They'll be surprised at Con Battle turning up, but the truth about how he escaped must be kept a profound secret between us. Nothing must leak out to show Gulwood that we know of his connection with the outrage."

"Very good. One thing: from what you've told me about the villains having laid so heavily against Swiftwing, they'll be partly punished by having to pay out a huge sum of money?"

"I hope so. You think Swiftwing will win, Sir Philip?"

"He'll win easily. If you wish to make a little money, Mr. Blake, back him! He's a certainty!"

"Thank you," replied Blake, with a little laugh. "I never bet. I've seen too much of racing to believe there's any such thing as a certainty."

"And I, too. But, of course, I mean Swiftwing is a certainty, bar accidents!"

"And there are more accidents on the turf than certainties," laughed Blake. "No, I don't bet. But I like to see a good race, and I'm going to see this one. See you later, perhaps, Sir Philip, and hope to congratulate you on a well-deserved victory."

Bar accidents! Ominous phrase! Was it to be justified in this instance?

The crowd certainly didn't seem to think so. How they cheered at Swiftwing, with Con Battle up, paraded, and afterwards cantered to the post!

If the jockey looked a trifle pale, he was well enough to ride at his best, while the horse looked in the very pink of condition.

"Look's well, doesn't he, sir?" remarked Tinker, as he and Blake left the ring and walked some distance to watch the race from a favourable position along the course.

"He's perfect, muscularly," answered the detective. "But he's quivering with nervousness."

"What about that, sir? Haven't I often heard you say that most of the best horses are very highly-strung?"

"Yes, yes," replied Blake, a little doubtfully, "but there's something about Swiftwing I don't quite like. Look how he throws his head on one side every now and then."

And he watched the horse anxiously until he was out of sight, on his way to the starting-gate.

From where they were they could not actually see the starting-gate. But they could see the advance flag-man, and they kept their eyes fixed upon his white flag, the dropping of which would tell them that they were off.

They were not to be off yet, though. There

seemed to be quite a long delay at the gate. Evidently one or more of the horses was giving trouble. Which, it was impossible for Blake or Tinker to see.

Then at last a great roar went up from the massed people on the stands! But it was not the old familiar yell, "They're off!" It was another and more ominous sound.

"Something's happened! I wonder what?" asked Sexton Blake quickly.

They were soon to know. A mounted policeman came galloping down the course like mad. Blake ducked beneath the rails and called to him:

"What's up, constable?"

"It's Swiftwing, sir," replied the man, recognising him as he flashed past. "He's dropped down dead!"

That was all, as he galloped swiftly on his way to inform the stewards and get the services of a vet.

It was enough for Sexton Blake, though. In a moment he was rushing along the course, with Tinker beside him, towards the starting-gate. As he ran the policeman's words rang in his ears: "Swiftwing; he's dropped down dead!" and his agitated mind was full of speculation!

A crowd had formed behind the starting-gate. In the midst of it lay poor Swiftwing, an animal full of vitality and beauty only a few short minutes before, and now a still, immovable thing—dead beyond recall! Near him, very white, and looking the picture of misery, stood poor Con Battle. There were tears in his eyes, and he had to blink very fast to keep them back. For he had loved Swiftwing, as he loved all horses, and his sudden death was to him as the loss of a dear friend.

"Make way—make way there!" shouted a police-inspector, and way was made for the veterinary surgeon who had been motored along from the paddock.

But he could do nothing save shake his head as he examined the poor dead animal. Swiftwing was dead, and the only opinion he could venture was that he had died a natural death. There was no sign of any sort of injury about him. Some weakness of heart, or other internal unsoundness, must have brought him to his sudden end!

die, the world must still go on, for no one is indispensable. So, though Swiftwing, the favourite, had died, the great race for which he had been favourite must yet be run.

It was run within the next few minutes. It was unevenful, and we shall not describe it. It is enough to say that it was won by Prince Garnet, a horse belonging to Mr. Bryden Mitchelmore, a wealthy Old England financier.

Prince Garnet had started at a long price, and not many people had backed it. A few had, though, and one among them was Josh Perkins, the chauffeur.

"So the boss's tip has popped up!" he muttered gleefully, as he pounced the fifty odd pounds he had won, just after the race.

"What a winner he is! No wonder they call him Fly Frank!" How did he come to know that Prince Garnet was such a cert? And how did he know that Swiftwing would not run, as he said yesterday? He could not have known that the horse was going to drop down dead! Couldn't—couldn't—couldn't he, thought?

SEXTON BLAKE 4th



CHAPTER 11.

By the Same Hand.

AS to that, Sexton Blake was wondering, too. With all respect to the veterinary surgeon who had examined Swiftwing, the detective, somehow, could not believe that the noble horse had died from natural causes.

"I can't help feeling there's been foul play," he said to Tinker, as they followed the poor dead animal along the course, to the stables behind the paddock, whither he was conveyed on a horse ambulance.

"But there's no sign of injury about him, sir. How could he have been killed?"

"That I don't know. But we do know it was to somebody's interest to stop the horse from running."

"You mean Gulwood? Think he had a hand in it?"

"I can't help feeling that he had. I can't help feeling that I've been outwitted after all, laddie," the detective said bitterly.

"How do you mean, guv'nor?"

"I ought to have foreseen that a man like Gulwood, on finding his plot against Con Battle had failed, would resort to some other trick."

"But you did foresee it, sir. That's why

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No. 144.

NOW ON SALE.

Though the greatest man on earth may

you prevented the jockey turning up till the last minute."

"I ought to have delayed till the last second. Instead of that, I allowed myself to be caught napping at the last moment."

"I don't see how you can blame yourself, sir."

"I do blame myself," Blake said ruefully. "If I find there really has been foul play, I shall want to kick myself."

"How can you find out?"

"I shall leave no stone unturned. Ah, here's Sir Philip Goring!"

The owner of Swiftwing was crossing the paddock at that moment, with a troubled look on his face.

"Here's a calamity, Mr. Blake!" he said. "Who would ever have anticipated that my horse would have come to a sudden end like that. The racecourse vet. says he died from natural causes, but that only makes it the more perplexing. My own veterinary surgeon—a very eminent man—examined Swiftwing yesterday, and declared him to be in perfect condition."

"No heart weakness?" queried Blake.

"Nothing like it. The horse was absolutely sound in every way. I can't help thinking some trick has been played."

"Just what I've been saying to my assistant. I should like to examine the horse, Sir Philip."

"Do so by all means. But it seems very little use. If the vet. can find no signs of injury, it's hardly likely that you will be more successful."

"I'll try, anyway," said Blake, and the matter was arranged.

So behold Blake presently kneeling down beside the dead horse in the big loose box in which it had been placed. The veterinary surgeon, who had already given his opinion regarding the cause of death, was an able enough man, and his examination had been thorough in its way. But it had been of the orthodox kind, an inspection of the body for traces of flesh wounds, and a careful feeling of joints in quest of possible fractured bones. Having found no sign of external injury whatever, he had—not unnaturally, perhaps, since he in no wise shared Sexton, Blake's suspicions—come to the conclusion that death was due to some internal malady.

Now Blake's examination was to be quite unorthodox, and much more exhaustive. With his powerful lens in hand, he started to scrutinise every inch of the surface of the horse's body. Not an inch of skin nor a single hair was to escape the most minute inspection.

So close a survey was a long and tedious operation. He gave special attention to the horse's sides, in search of spur marks. But Sir Philip Goring was dead against the use of spurs to his animals, and no trace of any could be found. Nor, indeed, for a full hour could Blake come upon any sign of injury at all.

But at the end of that time his infinite patience was to be rewarded. With Tinker's help, he had just propped up the animal's head, and was proceeding to turn back the plaited mane, when, all of a sudden, he gave

a start, and brought his lens to bear on the spot that had attracted his attention.

Watching his face keenly, Tinker saw it change.

"What is it, sir? You've found something?"

"I have! A most important something!" And the detective's jaws snapped together.

"Look for yourself," he said a moment later, and Tinker looked through the lens.

"It's a puncture through the skin, sir. Very slight, though."

"Slight, but sufficient." Blake's face was firm-set. "Laddie, what does it remind you of?"

"I don't know," replied Tinker, a little flustered. "Nothing in particular."

"Have you forgotten the central mystery we're trying to solve? How those two men died?"

"Great Scott!"

"Don't you see the similarity between this puncture under the horse's mane and those we discovered at the back of the heads of Bernard Ullawick and the other man?"

"Yes—yes, sir; I see it now. And you think that this was done by the same hand?"

"It was done in the same manner, and for the same purpose—to cause death!" Blake answered grimly.

"Who could have done it?"

"When we find that out we may get a key to the Marble Arch mystery as well."

"Could it have been Gaiwood?"

"Either he, or someone in collusion with him."

"How could anyone have done it? It was a risky thing for anyone to approach the horse and press a hypodermic syringe against his neck!"

"A very risky thing! It shows how desperate the man was. The failure of the plot against Con Battle drove him to that. But we must find out. I must first give information to the stewards, and ask for a post-mortem examination of the horse. Then we must make exhaustive inquiries."

The confidential report which Sexton Blake presently made to the officials caused a tremendous sensation. But he quickly convinced them of the advisability of the course he suggested, and they promptly instructed two veterinary surgeons to conduct the post-mortem.

Leaving them to their work, Blake, who had now been joined by Sir Philip Goring, at once sought out Con Battle.

"Did anyone approach Swiftwing in your presence—any stranger, I mean?" he asked him.

"Not to my knowledge, sir; nobody at all. There were several people round when I mounted, but nobody came near to the horse that I saw."

"Yes, there was, Mr. Battle!" came in the piping voice of Dickie Sholter, the diminutive stable lad who "did" Swiftwing, and who had courageously volunteered to try and ride him when it was feared that Con Battle would not turn up in time.

"Eh, eh? What do you mean, my boy?" asked Blake. "Did you see anyone approach the horse?"

"Yes, sir; I did," replied the lad. "It was while I was holding the poor horse, and waiting for Mr. Battle to change his clothes. A man comes right up to me, asks me if he was Swiftwing, says in what fine fettle he seemed to be—here came a little choke in the tiny's boy's voice, as he thought of the horse now dead" and then pats him!"

"Ha! Where did he pat him?" Blake asked quickly.

"On the neck, sir."

"Which side?"

"On the off side, sir."

Blake darted a swift look at Sir Philip Goring, who, closely following the drift of the detective's questions, and the answers the boy had given, nodded his head gravely.

"What sort of man was it?" was Blake's next query. "A rough-looking man?"

"Oh, no! Reglar toff, he was! Dressed up to the nines he was, with race-glasses and all."

"Did Swiftwing do anything when the man patted his neck?"

"He did, sir. He gave a neigh, and flung up his head. But Mr. Battle came along just then and mounted him, and he was quiet in a moment."

"Gave a neigh and flung up his head," repeated Blake, with another look at Sir Philip. "Would you know the man again, my boy, if you saw him?"

"Yes, sir; I think so."

"Then come along with me."

"What do you mean, Mr. Blake?" asked Sir Philip, sidling up to him and whispering.

"I'm going to point a certain man out to him."

"Then you suspect somebody?"

"I suspect Francis Gulwood, the man who caused Battle to be kidnapped."

"Where is he to be found?"

"Somewhere in Tattersall's. He's been there most of the afternoon."

"Shall I come with you?"

"I'd rather you didn't. I don't want to attract his attention. He won't recognise me in this disguise."

"I shall be eager to know whether the boy identifies him?"

"I'll come back and tell you at the earliest possible moment."

Blake hurried away towards Tattersall's ring, accompanied by Tinker and Dickie Sholter. Arriving there, they looked about in search of Gulwood.

"There he is," whispered Tinker, indicating a little group of well-dressed men, of whom Gulwood was one.

"Right!" said Blake.

Then, plucking little Dickie Sholter by the arm, he drew him a little nearer.

"Do you recognise the man among that lot?" he asked him.

"No, sir," replied the boy, shaking his head, after looking at the group intently.

"It wasn't the man with the brown race-glasses and with his coat slung over his arm?"

Dickie took a keen glance at Gulwood, who was the man described.

"No, sir; it wasn't him."

"You are quite sure?"

"Positive, sir."

"That settles that, then," Blake said to Tinker. "We can do nothing more at the moment."

"Rather disappointing, sir?"

"In a way, yes. But I don't know. I feel pretty confident Gulwood arranged the business, though it's probable he got one of his confederates to do the job."

"A ticklish job to do on the spur of the moment. It isn't everybody can use a hypodermic syringe properly."

"The man who used this one had used one before. He may have been one of the actual murderers in the Marble Arch affair. There were two of them, you know."

"Is that certain, sir? Couldn't they both have been done by one man?"

"Impossible! I have ascertained from the police that both men dropped down within two or three seconds of one another. There wouldn't have been time for anyone to cross the road in the intervening time. But here's Sir Philip. I'm afraid he'll be a little disappointed, too; but it can't be helped."

"Well, any luck?" asked the baronet, coming up.

"I'm sorry to say, no. It wasn't Gulwood who patted Swiftwing's neck. But I feel firmly convinced he's at the bottom of this business."

"I don't know," said the other a little gloomily. "I've been doubting whether that puncture in the neck can mean anything after all. It's so very slight!"

Before Blake could answer, something else happened to put an effectual end to the baronet's doubts. A police-officer came hurrying up to them.

"Beg pardon, sir!" he said, saluting.

"But Lord Redland sends his compliments, and will you please step across to the stewards' room?"

"I'll go at once. Mr. Blake, you had better come too."

They entered the room where Lord Redland, one of the stewards of the meeting, was awaiting them, with a very grave face.

"The post-mortem examination on Swiftwing has been completed," he announced.

"Mr. Sexton Blake's theory has been confirmed. Swiftwing undoubtedly died as the result of a virulent poison being injected into his neck at the junction of the spinal cord with the brain!"

"Dear me, dear me!" said Sir Philip.

"Then you were right absolutely, Mr. Blake. What more can we do to clear this matter up?"

"I know what I'm going to do," the detective answered. "I'm going to keep Francis Gulwood under close observation till I obtain proof against him."

"As I understand it," put in Lord Redland, "you have already proof that he engineered the plot against Con Battle, the jockey. Can't he be arrested for that?"

"Undoubtedly he could be," returned Blake. "But, as I have explained to Sir Philip, I suspect him of a very much graver charge, and it is evidence of that I chiefly want. To arrest him now, on this minor charge, would spoil everything."

"Well, you know best, Mr. Blake," the lordship said. "And I am certain we cannot do better than leave everything in your hands."

Blake and Tinker went back to where they had last seen Gulwood. Racing was just over, and the rings were rapidly emptying. Standing near the turnstile, Blake presently caught sight of Gulwood. He was coming out, in close conversation with a short, stout, opulent-looking man, with a clean-shaven face, a heavy bulldog jaw, hard grey eyes, and a red neck, which bulged apoplectically over his collar.

Both were evidently on good terms with themselves and with one another, for the stout man was beaming and throwing his fat hands about with delight, while Gulwood was smiling back at him.

Blake could not get near enough to hear what they were saying, for they had sunk their voices to a very low pitch, but he followed them in the hope of discovering something.

Across the course they went, to a section of ground railed off to form a "park" for the scores of motor-cars there. Gulwood left his companion for a few seconds to speak to Josh Perkins, and to tell him he wouldn't want his car that day. Then he came back to the other man, and presently took his seat alongside him in a swagger Rolls-Royce.

A word to the liveried chauffeur, and they were off.

Sexton Blake turned to a policeman who happened to be standing by.

"Fine car that, constable!"

"You're right. Belongs to the stout gentleman sitting on the left."

"Ah, who is he?"

"Mr. Bryden Mitchelmore."

"What, the owner of Prince Garnet, who won the big race? No wonder he seems pleased with himself!"

"I should think so, sir! They say he backed his horse to-day to win a fortune, and—well, he's won it! Not that he needed it, for, goodness knows, from all accounts, he's rich enough already."

With a laughing rejoinder Blake passed on. But the laugh vanished from his face as he walked towards the exits with Tinker.

"So Gulwood is pally with Mr. Bryden Mitchelmore, the owner of Prince Garnet! As well as laying against poor Swiftwing, he's most likely backed the winner also, and won money all round. The plot thickens, laddie! We must keep a closer eye on Francis Gulwood than ever. Not only that, but it may pay to keep an eye on this Bryden Mitchelmore as well!"

"Think he's had anything to do with today's business?"

"Impossible to say," returned Blake, with a shrug of his shoulders, "but it may be so. It is obvious that he is mightily pleased over something. Maybe, his pleasure is due to the fact that the plot against Swiftwing was so successful as to pave the way for the victory of his horse, Prince Garnet. Anyway, we must do our best to keep an eye on both of them."

CHAPTER 12.

The Severed Finger!

IT being impracticable, personally, to keep a close eye on two different men, Sexton Blake decided to give his chief attention to Francis Gulwood, and to trust to time to find out the connection between him and Bryden Mitchelmore.

For three days he shadowed Gulwood therefore, following him to various clubs and restaurants and theatres. While getting by this means a comprehensive notion of the villain's movements, he yet failed to come upon anything to throw light on the central mystery he was investigating.

On the fourth day, however, was to come a development!

Disguised as usual, Blake and Tinker were waiting about outside Randolph Mansions, Bayswater, where Gulwood had his swagger flat, when the latter came out and looked up and down the road.

"Looking for a taxi, I'll bet," whispered Blake.

He was right, for failing to see one, Gulwood presently moved towards a main road hard by where there was a cab-rank.

He got into the first cab and was driven away. At once Blake and Tinker strode towards the second cab.

"Follow that other car!" he whispered to the driver.

The latter winked knowingly as they got in, and in a moment was driving off in the wake of the first cab.

It was a comparatively easy sight to keep it in view, for the run, although one of three or four miles, was about the straightest one could find in all London.

Beginning in the Bayswater Road, it took in Oxford Street, High Holborn, Newgate Street, and Chancery, a route with no appreciable turn in it.

At the corner of The Poultry, almost opposite the Mansion House, the first cab stopped and Gulwood alighted. Thirty yards or so higher up, the second taxi did likewise, and Blake and Tinker got out.

They followed Gulwood afoot along Threadneedle Street and then into Throgmorton Street. Down a court off this Gulwood dived and entered a big block of offices.

Blake cautiously approached and looked at the big brass plate on the swing doors.

"It's the offices of the 'Worldwide Financial Operations Syndicate,'" he whispered to Tinker as he came back.

"Sounds important! What's he gone there for, sir?"

"To see Bryden Mitchelmore. The W. F. O. S. is the concern he's at the head of."

"Oh, I didn't know that. Looks a prosperous show. Gaudy offices, ain't they? No wonder they say Mitchelmore's got a millionsaire. Why the commissionaire's got enough gold on his uniform to float a war loan."

"Don't be deceived by appearances, laddie. All that glitters is not gold. Like many another man reputed to be a millionsaire, this Bryden Mitchelmore is no such thing. He's made pots of money in his time, but he's

extravagant and gets rid of it as fast as he makes it. According to a stockbroker friend of mine, his business is in a very shaky state. Unless Mitchelmore's luck changes I'm told that it's not unlikely he'll go amash."

"Won't this big win over Prince Garnet save him?" asked Tinker innocently.

"I think not," replied Blake with a laugh. "Turf business may mean a win of a few thousands, but high finance may involve millions. It's millions he needs to pull him out of the fire, according to what my friend tells me."

"Hush!" whispered Tinker, pulling Blake suddenly by the sleeve. "Gulwood's coming out again, and Mitchelmore with him!"

"Quite right!" returned Blake, stepping back into a doorway. "It's just one o'clock and they're going to lunch probably. We'll follow them."

Blake was quite right, for presently the two turned and disappeared into a restaurant hard by.

"They're probably going to talk over something important," whispered Blake. "I'd give something to know what it is. I must try and find out. Wait here for me!"

The detective entered the restaurant and managed to get a secluded seat quite close to the two men he was watching, while Tinker waited outside.

Fully half an hour passed and Tinker was beginning to get impatient, when the two men came out. For a minute or two they stood in earnest conversation on the pavement. They then separated, Bryden Mitchelmore going back to his office, while Gulwood went off in the opposite direction.

No sooner had they gone than Sexton Blake charged from the lobby of the restaurant.

"They've gone, sir," Tinker said, sidling up to him.

"Yes, I know. I watched them, but didn't risk being seen by coming out into the street."

Blake's face was grave, and grew graver still as he added in a whisper:

"If I'm not mistaken, laddie, we're up against two of the biggest scoundrels in London!"

"Hullo, you've discovered something, sir?"

"Nothing definite. Only my suspicions are raised to fever heat! I got a seat near them in yonder, but I couldn't hear much of what they said. But I heard something—enough to tell me that they've got some huge rascally scheme in hand!"

"What is it?"

"That I don't know. What I do know is that it's a scheme with 'millions in it.' I heard Mitchelmore say so. 'Millions in it, my boy, millions in it!' Those were the words he used to Gulwood."

"Gee whiz! Did you hear anything more?"

"Nothing consecutive. Only a phrase here and there. But I want to find out more, and I'm going to do it!"

"How?"

"By going down to Wildbarrow on Friday night!"

"Wildbarrow?"

"It's a little place on the Berkshire Downs. It's where Bryden Mitchelmore's horses are trained. He has a sort of shooting-box down there as well. I heard him invite Gulwood down for the weekend in order to discuss their scheme in further detail."

"Funny place to choose. Why can't they discuss it in London?"

"That's what Gulwood asked. But it appears that certain maps and plans which are involved in the scheme are down at Wildbarrow. I heard Mitchelmore say so."

"What can the maps and plans be?"

"I don't know. But they seem to be of tremendous importance, because Gulwood seemed surprised to hear they were down there, and strongly recommended Mitchelmore to keep them in his safe at the office for greater security. If I knew whereabouts in the house down at Wildbarrow to look for them I'd go down at once and risk burgling the place. As I don't, I must follow them down on Friday and try to find out what the plans are then."

"You'll go down by car, I suppose?"

"No, by train. That's how they're going. I heard Mitchelmore say so. It appears the roads are bad."

"Am I to come with you?"

"Yes, and we'll take Pedro, too. He may be useful."

With that arranged, Friday afternoon found them once more on the watch near the court off Throgmorton Street where Mitchelmore's offices were. This time, however, Blake was visible. Tinker was in a waiting taxi hard by, in charge of Pedro the bloodhound, whose presence in a crowded City street would have excited comment and perhaps "given the game away."

Apart from that, the detective foresaw what would probably happen, and guessed that he would require a cab.

His foresight was justified, for when somewhat late—it was past six o'clock—Mitchelmore and Gulwood at last came out, they at once secured a taxicab and started off.

In a moment Blake had joined Tinker in the other cab, and was off in pursuit.

"Where are they going, sir?"

"I didn't hear them say, but it's any odds on Paddington, unless they have changed their plans."

They hadn't changed their plans, and Paddington it was.

Close on their heels at the booking-office, the detective heard Mitchelmore take two tickets for Sapley, and a minute later he had booked to there also.

"There's no station at Wildbarrow," he explained to Tinker as, seated in a compartment not far from the men they were watching, they found the train starting. "It lies remote among the downs, and Sapley's the nearest point the railway touches."

The run was a good one as far as Didcot Junction, but after that the train stopped at every station, and it was beginning to get dark when at length Sapley was reached.

Blake was glad of the darkness, since it enabled them to get Pedro out of the train without attracting the attention of the

other two. To further guard against their being seen, they remained at the further end of the platform until Mitchelmore and Gulwood had passed through the booking-office into the road outside.

When presently they, too, reached the station yard, it was just in time to see the two men being whirled away in an open motor-car, driven by a man who had more the cut of an old-fashioned stableman than that of an up-to-date chauffeur.

"That's done it!" murmured Tinker. "They're off at thirty miles an hour, and not another car to be had in this dead-and-alive village."

"Well, we know where they're going, so it doesn't much matter. We can pad the hoof. It's only six miles, and the night's fine, though a bit dark. I've got a map, so wait a bit while I trace out the way."

He stood beneath one of the station lamps to look out the road they must take; then they set off.

For a couple of miles the way lay along the main road running along the foot of the long range of downs, but then the direction changed to a chalky track that wound its way right up into the heart of the lonely hills.

While these hills were for the most part bare and the chalky road in consequence open and free, there were places here and there where these conditions did not obtain. In certain spots trees and bushes straggled and sprawled to darken the way and to shrink the track to a dangerous narrowness.

It was at one of the places that Pedro, who had been ambling along quietly enough so far, created of a sudden a scene of some excitement.

With his nose to the ground as usual, he abruptly came to a halt, straightened his fore paws, and pressed them stiffly so as to throw his head and shoulders back a little, and emitted a low, suspicious growl.

"Why, what's up?" exclaimed Tinker, rushing forward and switching on his electric torch.

As he stooped forward a cry involuntarily broke from him.

Blake was up to him in a moment.

"What is it?"

"Look sir! Spots of blood, and—and something else!"

He pointed with a shudder to a small object lying on the ground. A tiny object, but a grisly thing all the same.

"The top joint of a man's middle finger!" said Blake, with a quick indrawing of the breath. "Cut off clean as if by a razor!"

"Whose finger is it, and how did it get here?"

"Difficult to say, laddie," answered Blake, examining the grim object through his lens. "Nail well manicured and grain of skin very clean and well-defined. Belonged to the hand of a man of leisure, and one not accustomed to much manual labour. Strange—very strange to find such a thing here."

"What are you going to do about it, sir?"

"We can't do anything at the moment. We must inform the local police at the first opportunity. At present our business lies at

the paddocks at Wildbarrow," was Blake's answer, as he placed the small grim object carefully in a little tin box and pocketed it.

They pushed on up the winding chalk track. Somehow the strange discovery made them very quiet, and they said very little until, arrived on the top of the downs and walking along the crest, they presently caught sight of a little cluster of houses lying in a hollow just over the other side.

"The village of Wildbarrow," murmured Blake. "We'd better inquire the way to the paddocks."

As they approached the beginning of the scattered village street, it seemed deserted, but all of a sudden Tinker caught sight of a uniformed figure standing beneath a doorway.

"It's a policeman!" he exclaimed.

"So it is, the village constable! A stroke of luck, laddie, we can tell him about our discovery. That's his cottage, I suppose."

In two minutes Blake had told Constable Lumkin who he was, showed him the severed finger, and told him all he knew about it. Lumkin was a big, burly, stolid man of Berkshire, an excellent chap for a rough and tumble business, but a little dull and unimaginative.

"I'll inquire to-morrow if anybody have mislaid such a thing, sir," he said with unconscious humour. "It, he a head bit o' personal belongin', but I s'pose 'ad better be sent to the lost property office pendin' anybody claimin' it."

It was no laughing matter, but Blake came near to laughing at the policeman's naive remark. He checked himself, however, and answered gravely:

"No, I'll take care of it for the present. Here's my card with my London address, so that you can communicate with me if necessary later on. If, on the other hand, you discover anything by to-morrow morning, apply to me at the local inn—there I am, I suppose?"

"Yes sir—the Crown—a little way along the street!"

"Good! I'll go on there and arrange for a bed."

They were soon at the Crown, and in a few minutes had engaged rooms for the night.

"Don't want to go to bed yet, I suppose, sir?" asked the landlord.

"No, we are going for a little walk first, and would like some supper when we get back. By the way, can you tell me the way to The Paddocks?"

"Mr. Mitchelmore's place you mean, sir? Yes, of course. It's about three parts of a mile on—past the end of the village street. You'll see the big gates leading to the training stables on the left-hand side. The trainer's place is just beyond, and Mr. Mitchelmore's house just beyond that. You can't miss it."

"Thank you!"

"Want to see Mr. Mitchelmore, sir?" queried the landlord.

"No," answered Blake easily. "I'm interested in turf matters, that's all, and like to have a look at the various training quarters if I happen to be in their neighbourhood."

"I was going to say, sir, as you'd find him at home. I see him about an hour ago in his car with a friend. Just come down from London, I expect."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and his friend looked as if he could do with a breath of fresh air. Mortal pale and had been looked when they pulled up here and ordered some brandy."

"So they pulled up here and had brandy, did they?" asked Blake, growing more interested.

"Not Mr. Mitchelmore, but his friend did. Seemed to want it, too. He'd met with an accident I think."

"An accident?"

"Well, he'd got his hand all bound up in a handkerchief, and I could see that the blood had soaked through."

"Which hand?" asked Blake quickly, and darted a swift look at Tinker.

"The left one, sir!"

"Dear me, dear me!" was all Blake answered, but there was a world of meaning in the way he looked at Tinker again.

"Well, we'll go for our little walk, landlord. See you later," he added a moment after.

"Guv'nor, why did you look at me like that?" Tinker asked when they had got some little distance on.

"You heard what the landlord said about Gulwood's hand?"

"Of course I did. I see what you mean. You think—"

"I think it quite possible that severed finger may have belonged to Gulwood."

"But how could such a thing have happened? He was in the car all the time."

"I know no more than you, laddie, and can't even guess. If it was an accident, it's a most curious one. But in any case, if it really is Gulwood's finger, it may prove immensely useful."

"In what way?"

"Well, I've a strong suspicion that Gulwood may have done time in the past under another name. If so, this severed finger may help us to identify him at the finger-print department at Scotland Yard! But silence now. Here we are at The Paddocks!"

CHAPTER 13.

Mysterious Movements.

THEY had halted at a very quiet spot. From the village, which lay in a little hollow in a shoulder of the hill, the road had taken a steady rise until here they were almost on the cresting ridge-way of the downs.

Opposite to them was a wide gate leading into the yard of the racing stables, which surrounded the yard on three sides and afforded accommodation for the large number of horses always in training there. For Wildbarrow Paddocks had been in existence for generations, and formed one of the most famous training centres in the annals of the Turf.

More than one Derby winner had had his home there in the past, while in the days when old John Weyland had been its guiding spirit as trainer, and a former Duke of Wessex had been its principal patron, it had been regarded as a model of what a training establishment should be. Alas! that it should have fallen into the ownership of a financial juggler like Bryden Mitchelmore, and under the control of the equally rascally Dan Cupples, who trained for him.

Beyond the yard and a little to the right, was the trainer's house, while beyond that, and divided from it by a fair-sized paddock, was a bigger house which Mitchelmore always spoke of as his shooting-box. Behind that again were two more paddocks, and beyond them the wide open downs, stretching for miles and miles and facing all the breezes that blew.

"No lights in the stables or the trainer's house," whispered Blake, who had previously mastered the geography of the place. "We'll try further along. I gathered from the landlord that there's another entrance gate to Mitchelmore's place."

"Yes, there it is," said Tinker, a minute later, as they walked on a short distance. "And there's lights in the house, too!"

"Let's get a little nearer to the house," replied Blake in an undertone. Then, before they had got a dozen paces past the gate, he caught Tinker by the arm and drew him beneath the shelter of the shrubbery bordering the short drive.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"Somebody moving about at the side of the house."

"I heard nobody, sir."

"I did. Listen! There it is again. Somebody's opening the door of that outbuilding yonder!"

He pointed a little to the left of the house. Tinker, noiseless as a cat, parted the shrubs with his hands and peered through.

"It's the fellow who drove them from Sapley Station," he whispered. "He's just lit a lamp, and I can see his face. He's doing something to a truck or— Why, if it isn't a side-car!"

"You're right, laddie. It's latish for a journey. Where can he be going?"

"Hush!" It was Tinker this time who laid his hand on his master's sleeve. "Somebody else is coming out of the house. From that side door—look!"

A tall figure crossed the intervening space. "Gulwood!" whispered Blake, as he came into the glow of the light. "He's going too. He's dressed for a journey. Heavens! How pale he looks!"

"Yes, and his left hand is all bandaged up."

"That's so. The landlord was right about his having met with an accident. They're both getting in. Where can they be going? Oh, if we only had a car to follow them!"

But such a thing was quite out of the question. It was hopeless to think of following them. All they could do was to crouch among the shrubs and watch them finish their preparations.

"We can be back in an hour, you say, Roach?" they heard Gulwood say.

"About that!" returned the chauffeur grumpily. "But I wish I wasn't in this job. It's the sort I don't relish."

"Well, you've got to come along," returned Gulwood. "After all, we shouldn't have had it to do but for your reckless driving!"

"What! Blame me, when you kept telling me to go faster and faster. I like that!"

"Well, we won't argue about it now. Get on. The sooner the job's done and we're back here, the better I shall like it."

"Don't see why we should trouble. We could leave things as they are, and not know anything about it."

"Get on!" answered Gulwood sternly, and it seemed as if his face went a shade paler as he glanced at his wounded band.

Another minute and they were out of the gate, passing quite close to Blake and Tinker, and whirling along the road out of sight.

"Oh, for a car to follow them and find out what this business is!" exclaimed Blake again.

"What can it mean?"

"I don't know! Something serious must have happened on the road as they drove here."

"That's certain. Wonder if Gulwood's going back to try and find the bit of finger that was cut off?"

"It has to do with that; but I fancy there's something else that's taken them out to-night," answered Blake grimly.

"What can we do to find out? We're almost helpless."

"We are," was Blake's rueful reply. "All we can do is to wait here till they come back, and trust to finding out something then. You heard them say they'd be back in about an hour?"

"Yes; that means they can't be going very far. Where are we going to wait, sir?"

"Here; we can't do better. We're well hidden by the shrubs, and fortunately the night isn't cold. Sit down and make yourself as comfortable as you can."

He set the example by squatting down amid the shrubs, with Tinker within two yards of him, Pedro sprawled between them, waiting and listening, and thinking, with his head on his paws.

And for an hour Sexton Blake sat waiting and listening and thinking, too. His face was hidden by the gloom of night; but, could it have been seen, its grimness would have startled the beholder.

Grim indeed it was, with the strong jaw set, the keen eyes drawn closer than usual, while a deep furrow was in the contracted brows. His whole attitude told of deep abstraction and intense concentration. For a full hour he sat immovable and in silence, while his acute brain dissected that last ominous conversation between Francis Gulwood and Jerry Roach, and probed and probed to lay bare its meaning!

sprang erect, with ears and eyes straining, ready for anything.

Dead silence reigned among them in the shrubbery; dead silence also reigned over the greater part of the desolate downs. But along the road from the village towards them came the throb of a motor and the whirr of wheels.

Gulwood and Roach coming back? It must be. Who else was likely to be abroad at such an hour on the top of these wild downs?

Yes, it was they, for as they approached the gate their pace grew slower. Another moment and they had turned through, two fans of bright light mowed down the darkness of the drive, and the side-car came in to the sight of the two still figures waiting and watching in the shrubbery.

It passed them, went towards the house, turned slightly, and finally drew up at the door of the garage.

Gulwood got out of the side-car, while Roach dismounted from the driving-seat. Both looked worn and pale, and neither spoke save in a whisper, as the chauffeur helped the other off with his leather-lined motor-coat.

That whisper was evidently an instruction, for directly he had wheeled the car out of sight, Roach made for another outhouse, and emerged from it carrying an armful of shavings and some sticks.

Bearing these, he passed through another gate, followed by Gulwood, into the kitchen-garden beside the house.

"What's their game now, sir?" asked Tinker.

"Looks as if they're going to make a fire somewhere," returned Blake, grimmer than ever now. "We must try and see. Follow me. Keep Pedro close, and don't make a sound."

The detective led the way through the shrubs and past the garage to the gate, giving on to the garden. Pausing to listen and peep through, they caught sight of the two men some little distance off.

Already they had made their fire, which had burst into quick flame by pouring paraffin on the shavings. The pungent odour of the oil reached the two watchers, while the leaping flames lit up Gulwood and Roach and their surroundings.

Where they were, was a partially enclosed space, backed by a long greenhouse, flanked on one side by the big, rounded mound of an asparagus bed, and on the other by a line of espalier apple-trees. Thus were they screened from sight on three sides, and were only open to observation from the side on which Blake and Tinker stood. Even they could not see all the details, and were much too far off to hear anything that might be said.

Blake longed to approach closer, but to do so would be risky. They might be seen and that would spoil all. They must needs rest satisfied with watching from where they were.

They watched; saw Roach pour more oil on to the fire, then feed the flames with more sticks and dry leaves, and pour more

Sexton Blake suddenly rose and straightened himself; so did Tinker. Pedro also

oil still until the bonfire was one red glow of roaring flames.

So far their operations, though surprising, had given no inkling of their real intention. But after a few minutes, and when the fire was at its fiercest, there came a most startling incident.

For all of a sudden Gulwood picked up his heavy motoring coat, which he had previously placed over a currant-bush, and opening it full out, stepped forward with arms outstretched and pitched the coat right on top of the flames!

The coat, too, had been doused with paraffin and it flared instantly. Borne on the light wind, there came to the nostrils of the unseen watchers the strong smell of burning wool and leather!

"Did you see what it was he threw on the fire?" whispered Tinker.

Blake's grim jaws came open to answer:

"Yes, his coat."

"Why's he burnt it?"

"To destroy some tell-tale marks—why else?"

"What would the marks tell of?"

"That remains to be found out."

"How can we find out?"

"I don't know—yet. We must wait a while. Presently they may go in. Then possibly we may be in time to save some remnants of the coat that may tell us what we want to know."

But the chance of this dwindled as the time went on, and the two men showed no signs of leaving the fire till their work was done.

Time and again they piled the flames with oil and further fuel, then waited an hour until the whole heap had burnt itself out and nothing was visible save a shrunken heap of charred ashes. Then and not till then did they quit the spot and go into the house.

Blake waited where he was until the shooting of bolts and the rattle of a chain told him they were safely inside. Then, bidding Tinker remain where he was, he cautiously approached the dying fire.

In three minutes he came back shaking his head.

"No go, laddie," he muttered. "The fire's burnt everything to ashes. It's just possible we might find something if we could examine it closely by daylight, but it's certainly no go now."

"Will you come back and look at it by daylight, sir?"

"Perhaps to-morrow morning; but we shall see! But, anyway, we can do no more to-night. We'll get back to our inn, get some supper, and then some sleep."

As they moved back along the drive, a sudden sound made them halt. It was the noise of water gushing through a waste pipe!

"Hallo! Sounds like somebody having a bath," remarked Tinker. "Bit queer at such a time of night. Who can it be?"

"Gulwood, for certain, removing more tell-tale marks!"

"Guv'nor, what do you mean?"

"I mean," replied Blake, his face now at its grimmest, "that I think there's been

dark work done to-night. To-morrow we must set ourselves to find out what it is. Our first task in the morning must, after all, be to examine the ashes of that fire!"

CHAPTER 14.

The Discovery Amid the Furze.

BUT "after all" that was not to be their first task in the morning. Other strange and startling things were to happen to turn them from their purpose.

Sexton Blake had only lately risen, and was just completing his toilet, when a hurried knocking came at his bedroom door.

"The police are here, sir!" came in the alarmed voice of the landlord.

"Eh, are they, though? What do they want?"

"Don't know, sir. There's Inspector Lodge, from Ufbury, as well as Constable Lumkin. They asked for Mr. Brown, and as you're the only one of that name staying here, I—"

"Oh, yes; all right. Tell them I'll be down in one minute," responded Blake, for Brown was the name he had instructed the local policeman to ask for him by.

Completing his toilet, he hurried out of the room and down the stairs. In the lobby of the inn stood Constable Lumkin and his superior officer, a very tall, wiry man, with black hair and a heavy moustache of the same colour, waxed at the ends. Both looked more than a little excited.

"Morning, constable!" said Blake. "I needn't ask if there are any developments. Your face tells me that something important has happened?"

"Somethin' very important, sir. Some-thing 'beavin' on the mutilated human finger, which you showed me last night. But this is Inspector Lodge, sir, from 'ead-quarters at Ufbury. He'll tell you about it."

"Ah, pleased to meet you, inspector," said Blake, shaking hands. "What has happened?"

"The body of the man to whom the missing finger belonged has been found, sir!" returned the inspector.

"The body? Then the man is dead?"

"Yes, sir. To my mind he was murdered."

"Murdered! Good heavens! What makes you think that?"

"The way the body is cut about. Clear case of murder, to my mind. A scythe was found quite close to the body, covered with blood. There can be very little doubt, I think, but that the scythe was the weapon used to kill him."

"A strange weapon with which to kill a man," murmured Blake, in grave tones.

"Where was the body found?"

"At a lonely spot some two miles or so from here. Among the furze, quite close to the place where, as I gather from Constable Lumkin, you found the mutilated finger last night. Some farm-hands discovered the body early this morning and gave information."

"And he has part of a finger missing?"

"Half of the middle finger of the left hand. There can be no doubt it is the same as the one you found."

"That certainly seems certain. Who is the poor fellow? Is he a native of these parts?"

"No, sir. He's a stranger, more or less. But he's been identified as a man named Ezra Taylor. It appears he was a travelling fagger!"

"A travelling fagger! What is that?"

"A man who travels from village to village at certain times of the year, and lends a hand where wanted, at cutting grass and clearing corners of cornfields where the machines can't get."

"A labourer, then—a man used to rough toil?"

"Undoubtedly."

Blake lapsed into momentary silence, and looked grave. The thought had come to him that the finger he had discovered was unlikely to have belonged to a manual labourer. The skin was too white and fine in texture, the nail too carefully manicured and polished. Still, in view of the other tragic circumstances, he said nothing of his doubt just then. But the doubt intensified his interest.

"Where is the body now?" he asked.

"On the spot where it was found. In the ordinary way, I should have had it removed, but being informed by Constable Lumkin that you were in the neighbourhood, and thinking you would like to examine it where it is, I left it undisturbed in charge of a couple of my men."

"Good! Excellent! You couldn't have done better, inspector. Inspector. I should like to examine the body on the spot where it was found. How can we get there?"

"I've a car outside, Mr. Blake."

"Excellent again. I'll come with you at once. Have you room for my assistant and my bloodhound Pedro?"

"Plenty, sir."

"Then we'll take them with us, if you don't mind."

All the way out to the tragic spot, that same doubt assailed Blake's mind. Was it possible that that white-skinned finger with the polished nail could have belonged to a man who earned his daily bread by hard manual labour?

He did not utter his doubts because presently he would be able to put them to the test. Time enough then, if the finger-joint he had found, and the mutilated hand of the "travelling fagger" should show any discrepancy.

A run of something over two miles, and the car pulled up on the Downs road.

"That's the spot, where you see the two constables," said the inspector, pointing to a clump of furze bushes, some little way back from the road.

Blake looked across; then his eyes wandered backwards and forwards from where the dead body was to another spot where the road narrowed down and was overhung by trees, as though he were measuring the distance.

"About eighty yards from where Pedro found the finger-joint," he observed. "Well, I'd like to examine the body."

They strode across to where the dead man lay. The first glance at his hands was sufficient to settle Blake's doubts. They were the true hands of a man accustomed to much hard toil—strong, gnarled, misshapen and swollen at the knuckles.

Half of the middle finger of the left hand was missing, but in an instant Blake knew that the fleshy fragment he had found had never belonged to such a hand! He said so now at once.

"This is a more complex mystery than it seemed, inspector," he declared. "The finger I found never belonged to this man."

"Eh, what? What's that, Mr. Blake? What do you mean?"

"See for yourself," was Blake's response, as he drew the severed finger from the tin box in which he had placed it, and placed it against the sunbrowned and bloodstained hand. "Does it look like his? This poor fellow's hand is the hand of one used to hard work. This finger belonged to a man of leisure. Look at the whiteness and texture of the skin; look at the polished nail!"

Placed against the dead man's hand it certainly afforded such a contrast and contradiction as could not fail to impress anybody. It impressed Inspector Lodge.

"It does look different, certainly!" he agreed, obviously taken aback by the contrast. "But—but, of course, it must belong to him."

"I am certain it doesn't."

"Surely it must, Mr. Blake. Think of the circumstances. You find a mutilated finger overnight, and the next morning we find a dead man with a portion of the same finger missing. It must be the same. There can't be two opinions about it."

"All the same, I hold to mine. This finger-joint never belonged to the dead man."

Blake's confident words seemed to nettles the local police-officer.

"You astonish me, Mr. Blake," he said heatedly. "How could two men lose part of the same finger at the same time? The coincidence would be too wonderful! You'll be saying next that the man wasn't murdered!"

"No, I won't say that, because I'm not quite sure that he wasn't."

"Not quite sure that he wasn't? You mean, you're not quite sure that he was?"

"I repeat that I'm not quite sure that he wasn't. It's difficult to say whether he was killed by his first injuries."

"It's easy to see how he was killed. By wounds inflicted with the scythe. Look how the poor fellow has been cut about on the legs and in the side under the ribs."

"He may have been dead before those injuries were inflicted. As I say, his first injury may have killed him."

"I don't see what you mean by his first injury?"

"This!" answered Blake, pointing to the man's left shoulder, from which the coat had been torn. "See, the collar-bone is quite

broken. Snapped in two, while the rib immediately beneath had been pressed down and inwards. I shouldn't wonder if the doctors find that the bone pressed down on the heart, and that death was caused that way. An injury like that wasn't caused by the scythe!"

Inspector Lodge shifted about uneasily. Blake's reasoning had taken him quite beyond his depth. To him the case was plain enough, and free from subtlety. The man had been found dead, bearing upon him such wounds as might have been inflicted by the scythe found near him and all blood-stained. Therefore, the man must have been killed that way.

"I don't pretend to know what you've got in your mind, Mr. Blake," he said, a little coldly. "But I know what I've got in mine. I'm certain this man died from injuries inflicted on him by this scythe."

Blake nodded his head. He did not wish to argue further till he had found out other things which he knew remained to be found out. He went off on what seemed to be a side-issue, but which had a direct bearing on what was in his mind.

"To whom does this scythe belong? Do you know that, inspector?"

"It has been identified as belonging to the dead man himself."

"A tool of his trade," replied Blake, nodding again. "He carried it about with him from place to place, eh?"

"That's it. As a travelling fagger always does. Well, I must get the body along to the mortuary at Ubury. Are you coming back with us, Mr. Blake?"

"Not just yet. I want to have a look round first."

"As you like," answered Lodge, with a little shrug. "I'll be getting on."

He signalled to his men to lift the dead body, which Blake, before this, had examined pretty carefully. They bore it gently to the motor-car, laid it on a rug, and covered it over with a sheet. Another minute and they had started off for Ubury, the nearest town, in order to get the body examined by the doctors.

Blake watched them depart without a word. It was Tinker who broke the silence. "The inspector's a little wild with you, sir. He thinks you're splitting hairs."

"Do you think so?"

"Well, sir, I can't understand why you should have any doubt about how the man came by his death. Those wounds made with the scythe were surely enough to kill any man!"

"Certainly! The point I'm doubtful about is whether the man wasn't dead before those wounds were inflicted."

"What?" almost shrieked Tinker.

"Well, I fancy being knocked over by the motor-car was sufficient to cause death."

Tinker gazed at his master in wide-mouthed amazement.

"Killed by a motor-car! What motor-car?"

"The one in which Gulwood and Mitchell more drove from Sapley Station last night!"

"Guv'nor, you take my breath away. I

don't follow you a bit. How do you say the poor fellow came by his death?"

"I can't say for certain, but I'll tell you what I think happened last night. I think it was a case of manslaughter rather than murder."

"I imagine the man Ezra Taylor was walking along the road there last night when, on approaching the narrow part where the trees are and where the road bends, he was run down by the car which was probably travelling much faster than it should have done."

"That certainly fits in with what we heard Gulwood and Roach talking about. But—"

"Let me finish what I have to say, and it may remove many doubts that are in your mind. We know that poor Ezra was a travelling fagger, and that he was accustomed to carry his scythe about with him from place to place. Now, in carrying a scythe, which is a dangerous thing, especially in the dark, the law requires that the blade shall be detached and fastened parallel with the handle. I suspect that last night Ezra failed to conform to the law, and carried his scythe over his shoulder, with the blade naked and exposed."

"Why should you think that?"

"Reason compels me to. The results show it. Rounding the bend in the road, the car came on him quite suddenly, caught him in the left shoulder and sent him spinning. In falling, the scythe must have swerved over against the car. Francis Gulwood must have thrown out his left hand to guard his face, and in doing so the keen blade cut off his finger as though with a razor!"

"Gee! Then you think it was Gulwood's finger we found?"

"I'm pretty certain of it."

"That would account for his wounded hand. All the same it doesn't account for Ezra losing his finger as well. How did that come about?"

"If my theory is right, it was deliberately amputated by Gulwood! It had all the signs of that. It was not cut clean through as a scythe blade would cut it through. It showed signs of having been hacked and the bone filed through."

"By Gulwood?"

"Yes. We know that he and Roach went out later in the side-car."

"You think they came here to do that? Why should Gulwood take all that trouble?"

"I could guess that, too, but I won't tell you my guess till later on. But it's plain he was anxious to recover his lost finger, or, failing that, to hide the fact that it was his."

"And make out that it was Ezra's. I begin to follow you, though I don't understand everything. You think also that he cut the old man about with his own scythe as well? Why should he do that?"

"To make out that the man was attacked and murdered. To hide the circumstances of the motor accident."

"But the motor accident would have been manslaughter at the worst. Why should he wish to make it look like a case of murder?"

"Because manslaughter would have been serious enough, in all conscience, and I suspect Gulwood wished to escape the attention of the police altogether. What happened, I imagine, was this. Eara was knocked down and the car was pulled up. Examining the old man, they probably found him dead, and carried the body to where it was found. Then they drove on to Wildbarrow. But by the time they arrived there, Gulwood had had time to think things over and had grown a bit fearful. He was shaking, in the first place, to recover his severed finger. Dead! anxious, for a particular reason, which I have at the back of my mind."

"What is the reason?"

"That's what I'm keeping back for the moment. I'll tell you when we return to London, and put it to the test. Failing to find the finger, Gulwood went to where they had left the dead body, and cut it about so as to make it look like a case of murderous attack by gypsies or people of that sort."

"Gee whiz, sir, but I begin to think you're right!" exclaimed Tinker, with a sudden thought. "If he really did what you say, it explains why he burnt his motor-coat and why he had a bath afterwards. It was blood—the blood of poor Eara Taylor—that he wished to remove! Those were the tell-tale marks you spoke of last night. But how did you know?"

"I didn't know. I only deduced it. But come, we must get back to Wildbarrow village. I want, if possible, to search that heap of ashes for further clues."

CHAPTER 15.

Flight!

RETURNING to the Crown Inn, they made a belated breakfast. Then, determined to waste no time, Blake set out for the Paddocks, with the intention of examining the charred remains of the bonfire.

He went alone, leaving Tinker and Pedro at the inn to await his return.

"I shall be less likely to attract attention if I go alone," he explained, and set out.

He knew it would be a ticklish business, in any case, this venturing in broad daylight into a private garden. Were he to be seen by Gulwood examining the heap of ashes, it might be awkward, for such a discovery—always providing his theory was correct—would drive Gulwood to desperation, and he would stick at nothing to safeguard himself.

With this in his mind, he drew near to the gates leading to the racing stables. As he did so, he heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and the next moment two men, mounted on hacks, issued from the gate.

In an instant Blake recognised Mitchelmore and Gulwood, and dodged back behind a tree, just in time, as he hoped, to avoid being seen.

From his hiding-place he watched them trot away across the open downs towards where a number of thoroughbreds were being

entered and galloped doubtless the frame of a string of horses out for their morning exercise.

"Nothing could have happened better," Blake muttered. "They'll be out of the way, at any rate. Now to see if the coast is quite clear!"

Very cautiously he moved a little further along the road, and passed into the drive leading to Mitchelmore's house. He looked towards the house, but could neither see nor hear anybody. As a matter of fact the household was but a small one, and, apart from Roach, who acted as chauffeur and gardener, the only other servant was an old woman who acted as cook-housekeeper.

Without knowing this, Blake judged from the pervading quietness of the place that very few people were about, and that it would be tolerably safe to risk a visit to the heap of ashes. Crossing the yard by the garage, then, he reached the garden gate, and peered through.

Nobody was about, and there within sight were the charred remains of the overnight bonfire, quickly and softly he stepped towards it, and, dropping to his knees, began raking among the ashes with his hands.

But for once Sexton Blake had made a mistake. He had thought the coast was clear and it wasn't!

Hardly had he begun his work than he was spotted by Roach. The latter, to make up for a disturbed night's rest, was dozing beneath the platform of shelter in the greenhouse close by.

Hearing a soft sound outside he raised his head, to behold a man raking with his hands among the ashes outside. For a moment he stared in astonishment. In another, he sensed danger to himself and Gulwood, and grew alarmed!

What ought he to do? In a second he had made up his mind. Treading noiselessly as a cat, he crept out of the greenhouse and skirted the garden unseen. Once past the house and on the open downs, he sped at top speed across to where Gulwood and Mitchelmore were watching the training of the horses.

They saw him coming, and moved towards him—they were about now—startled by the look of terror in his eyes.

"What is it, Roach?" asked Gulwood.

"There's a man in the garden over there, and he's searching the ashes of the bonfire!"

"What?" gasped Gulwood, and went suddenly pale. "Who is he?"

"I don't know. But he's there, and he must suspect—"

"Suspect what?" interposed Mitchelmore.

"What's this about a bonfire?"

Gulwood whispered something to him, and Mitchelmore looked furious.

"So you went out again late last night, after all, when I advised not," he hissed. "Fools, you have spoilt everything!"

"It's done now," answered Gulwood. "Someone must have seen something. This man in the garden. I must see who he is!"

"We must stop his mouth before it is too late. Come, Roach—quick!"

They started off. Mitchelmore called after them in alarm, but they paid no heed. He seemed inclined to go after them for a moment, but decided not to, and murmured: "I'll keep out of this, anyway. Curse their mad folly! It may spoil everything! I must keep right out of it!"

And he walked in the direction of the house.

Meanwhile, Gulwood and Roach hurried back towards the house, the former's brain seething with fears and desperate intention. They entered the garden from the further end, and approached the greenhouse.

Sexton Blake was still at his work, and so engrossed in it that he noted nothing else.

Gulwood watched him narrowly. "I can't fix him," he muttered. "But he's a big chap, and may be a 'tec. Anyway, what he's doing makes him dangerous. We must do something!"

"But what can we do?" asked Roach. "He looks an awkward one to tackle. Better clear out of this place and get right away before he sees us! If last night's business is discovered we—"

"Thunder, but I think you're right! Come on, we'll do a guy at once!"

But as they turned to move away, a twig snapped beneath Gulwood's foot. Blake heard it, looked up, caught sight of them, and leapt to his feet!

"Hallo, what are you doing here? What's your game, eh?" blustered Gulwood.

"No game in particular," answered Blake, not quite certain what best to do, taken by surprise as he was. "But as you're here I'd like to have a word with you."

He advanced towards them. Gulwood, with his guilty conscience full of visions of detectives and the fear of arrest, backed towards the greenhouse, his retreat the other way being cut off. He whispered to Roach, who also backed to where a big glass frame—the top of a cucumber-bed—was leaning against the greenhouse.

Both looked about them as if in search of some weapon, and Roach suddenly stooped and made a grab for a billet of wood.

Seeing this, Blake made a rush at him. But he never reached him. For before he could do so, Gulwood had seized the heavy frame with both hands, and tilting it forward, sent it canting over clean on to Blake.

The next instant and there came the sound of splintering glass and the sight of Sexton Blake sprawling to the ground, transfixed by the frame, which had broken over his head, and now remained firmly wedged over his shoulders.

Luckily for him, he was wearing a hat with a rather wide and very tough brim. While this had been forced by the impact of the heavy frame right over his eyes, it had prevented the splintering glass from cutting his face. Also, though the shock and weight of the frame had hurled him to the ground, cut his clothes a little, and bruised his head and shoulders, he had sustained no injury which might be regarded as serious.

His position was rather undignified than dangerous. Indeed, with his head thrust through the big frame like an exaggerated Elizabethan ruff, and with his face hidden by his crushed and battered hat, his condition might, under less grave circumstances, have been regarded as ludicrous and comical—something bordering on the farcical.

But in this case, circumstances made anything but a laughing matter. Having placed him hors de combat by their first move, the villains might at any moment return to the attack and carry things to a dangerous issue.

Regardless, therefore, of the jagged glass, Blake first thrust his hands through to adjust his hat, and then wriggled himself free from the smashed framework. No attack had come yet as he leapt to his feet. No wonder, for as he looked round he could see no sign of Gulwood or Roach.

He moved quickly about, looked into the greenhouse, searched behind the asparagus mound, peered into every corner of the garden, and then across the paddocks beyond.

Nothing of them could he see. They must have gone into the house or fled right away from the place? In the former case it would not be wise to attempt to take them single-handed. He had better return to the village and obtain help.

With this intention, he at once passed along the drive and out of the gate, and hurried along the road. He had barely got a quarter of a mile along when whom should he meet but Tinker, who had brought out Pedro for a run.

"Hallo, sir, you look as if you had been in the wars!" he exclaimed, catching sight of his master's battered hat and generally dishevelled appearance. "Hope you're not hurt!"

"Not a bit. It might have been far worse. I've had a dust-up with Gulwood and that fellow Roach. They knocked me down with all things in the world, the top of a cucumber-frame. It put me out of action for two or three minutes, and by the time I had freed myself from the thing they had disappeared! I was just going back to get help, because I fancy they must have returned to the house!"

"That they haven't, sir, for I caught sight of them across the downs only a few minutes ago!"

"You did? Where?"

"Over yonder," returned Tinker, pointing. "Just near that single tree on the top of the ridge. They were standing very close to one another, as if Roach was rebanding the bandage on Gulwood's hand!"

"Ha, it may have come loose, and the wound started bleeding afresh when he pitched that cucumber-frame over on me. Which way did they go, then?"

"Don't know, gov'nor. They dipped over the crest, and I lost sight of them. I'd no idea what had happened, or I'd have followed them."

"Well, we must try and follow them now. It's lucky Pedro is here! We'll make for

that tree, and see if the dog can strike the trail!"

As things turned out it proved to be a very simple matter. For, on reaching the spot where Tinker had seen the two villains, they came upon a strip of blood-stained linen, which Gulwood had evidently discarded in favour of a cleaner bandage. This afforded Pedro as good a scent as could possibly be desired, and he at once picked up the trail without difficulty.

It led off the downs to the flat and level land below, and presently on to the high road. It soon became plain, however, that the two fugitives had no intention of increasing their risks of pursuit and capture by sticking to the highway; for, having led the way along it for barely a hundred yards, the bloodhound suddenly struck off to the left along a narrow path through a wood.

It was a big, straggling wood, fully a mile and a half through it, but Pedro followed it out to the end without anything like a check. Emerging from the wood, more field-paths followed, then another strip of road and a track across the park of a private estate.

So for a couple of hours or more they continued the pursuit until they must have come quite eight miles all told. Then at last they found themselves on a main road again, and approaching some gates stretched right across it.

"Hallo, the railway, laddie! That's a level-crossing ahead of us. The gates are across the road, so it means a train is coming along presently."

"Yes, and here she comes, sir," answered Tinker, as they drew close up to the gates.

Then, all of a sudden, he started back, with an exclamation.

"Look—look at that hand resting on the ledge of that carriage window! It's bandaged!"

"Gulwood! It must be!" gasped Blake.

There was no doubt about it, for as the train drew abreast of them, and the carriage with the open window steamed past, the bandaged hand was quickly withdrawn, and a face appeared in its place.

It was the face of Francis Gulwood, and as it flashed past his evil eyes were fixed straight on Sexton Blake!

CHAPTER 16.

Blake's Daring Decision.

"**E**SCAPED us, after all!" cried Tinker, as they watched the train out of sight.

"Yes, I fear so. Roach was with him. I just caught a glimpse of him sitting in the corner."

"But we may catch 'em yet, if we wire along the line. There's the station yonder!" And Tinker pointed to about a quarter of a mile down the line. "It isn't Sapley, is it?"

"No; it must be Windford, the next station to it. We'll get along there, and wire, as you say. But I fear it will be very little good!"

"Why?"

"Because they saw us as they passed. Knowing we were after them, they'll be on the alert, and will probably quit the train before the wire can overtake them. Still, it's all we can do at the moment."

It was, and they did it. Messages were sent over the wire to all station to London, asking the officials to be on the look-out for the two fugitives.

Their efforts were to be in vain! That much may be said at once. Even as Blake had foretold the villains had taken alarm at sight of them near the level-crossing, and had taken occasion to quit the train at the very first opportunity. And so, for the time being, all trace of them was lost!

"What are you going to do now, sir?" asked Tinker, as they left Windford station and made their way back to Wildbarrow. "Gulwood and Roach have given us the go-by, but what about Mitchellmore? He must have been in that business last night. Are you going to have him arrested?"

"No, I think not, laddie," returned Blake thoughtfully. "You see, it's very uncertain whether he's guilty or not. For one thing, he did not go out a second time last night. While as to poor Ezra Taylor being run over as they drove from Sapley, remember it's only guesswork on my part. I believe he must have been, but I've no proof. There's nothing more stupid than arresting a man prematurely on insufficient evidence. It generally results in his getting off, and makes a later arrest and prosecution a thousand times more difficult. There's another thing also in this case. This last affair is very serious, of course, but what we're really after is to solve the Marble Arch affair, and so set poor Albert Moy free. Now, to arrest Mitchellmore for complicity in this latest business would, of course, be to put Gulwood and his unknown accomplices on their guard."

"Yes, I see that; but is seems rotten to let Mitchellmore go scot free!"

"It will only be for a time, laddie. Later, when we have full proof, he'll get his due. Meanwhile, it will be all to our advantage to let him think we have no suspicions of him at all. It will make it easier for me to shadow him."

"Ah, you're going to do that?"

"I am. I want to find out what that scheme is with the maps and plans. Gulwood came down to Wildbarrow to discuss that with him, remember. Gulwood's flight means that the discussion has been postponed, and that he'll get into touch with Mitchellmore again later on. Yes, I think it will be better to leave Mitchellmore alone for the present, and simply watch him till I can learn more, and then lay the whole lot by the heels."

All things considered it seemed to be the wisest plan, and Blake put it into operation at once. That very night, sneaking up to Mitchellmore's house, under cover of darkness, he saw, through the window, the figure of the financier bending over some papers spread out on the table. He could not see what they were, but he saw enough to guess that

these were the all-important plans and maps he had heard the villainous talking about. He saw Mitchelmore fold them all up, and then place them carefully away in a very large legal-looking envelope. This was on the Saturday night.

On the Sunday night he repeated his programme, but without discovering anything more. On the Monday morning, however, he saw Mitchelmore depart by train from Epsley station.

Under his arm, hugged closely to his side, was the big envelope.

"The maps and plans!" whispered Blake to Tinker, as, standing concealed in the waiting-room, they watched him. "If only we could get hold of that package, what a flood of light it would shed on the programme they have in hand!"

"But how can we get hold of it, sir?"

"We must keep him under close observation and hide our time, laddie. That's the only way. In cases like this it is patience that does it. Ha! He's got into the train, so we'll hop in, too!"

They got into one of the rear compartments unseen, and so travelled within a few yards of Bryden Mitchelmore back to London.

At Paddington the latter chartered a taxi, and Blake did ditto. Into this he got alone, instructing the driver to follow the first cab.

Tinker, in accordance with arrangements made in the train, took Pedro back to Baker Street, to await his master's return there.

As Blake anticipated, Bryden Mitchelmore drove to his office in that court off Throgmorton Street, and he followed them. During the train journey he had made some slight, but effective, changes in his disguise.

As he alighted at a judicious distance from his cab and followed Mitchelmore into the Worldwide Financial Operations Syndicate offices, he was carrying a small handbag which had formed part of his luggage, and presented the appearance of a smart and bustling representative of some commercial concern.

With all the assurance in the world he followed Mitchelmore through the swing-doors and right through to the outer office.

He watched the principal pass through into an inner room, and go straight to a corner where stood a safe.

A clerk moved up to the counter to ask him his business.

"Fire assurance!" answered Blake briskly and beginning to open his bag.

"We're fully insured," replied the clerk.

"No doubt of that, I'm sure," rejoined Blake, fumbling with some pamphlets; "but on terms very much less favourable than those I can offer on behalf of the company I represent."

"Nothing doing!" the clerk said coldly.

"If only I could see your principal a moment, I'm sure I could convince him of the advantages of doing business with us," persisted Blake. "Is that the gentleman inside?"

And he took a keen glance at Mitchelmore through the open door.

"Yes it is; but he hasn't time to see you or anybody. He's busy."

"Very good, then," returned Blake, snapping his bag. "I'll call another time. Good-morning! Much obliged!"

He went out, chuckling to himself. His purpose had been attained. He had got a glimpse of that inner room, had seen Mitchelmore placing that precious envelope inside the safe, and had seen the name of the maker and exact pattern of the safe.

Outside, instead of returning immediately to the street he moved further along the court. An ancient City church stood there, with a fragment of its old graveyard beside it. At the end of this reared up the walls of a big block of offices. Glancing upward, Blake recognised one of the windows as belonging to Mitchelmore's inner room.

His jaws clamped together. Then he murmured beneath his breath.

"Things couldn't be better! The job should be easy. I'll try it this very night!"

Making for the street again he entered a cab, and was soon back at Baker Street.

"Any luck, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, and got a startling answer.

"The best in the world. I know where those papers are. They're in a Flintwick safe, No. 3, in Mitchelmore's private room. To-night I'm going to get them!"

"What? How?"

"I'm going to turn burglar!"

"Break into his office?"

"And into his safe, too. Look out my brace and bit and blowpipe. Recharge the battery for the electric hoer as well. I may want that. Pack them all in that small black bag, and have them ready for me at midnight."

"Want me with you, sir?"

"No; I go alone!"

CHAPTER 17.

The Burglary Near Throgmorton Street.

MIDNIGHT in the very heart of the City of London! Strange as it may sound to people who know not London, there is no more quiet and solitary a spot in all the world!

For at such an hour the workday frequenters of the teeming streets and offices have all long ago departed for their suburban homes, and none but a few caretakers and night policeman remain to guard the silent domain of commerce and finance.

The world's great mercantile centre was at rest—asleep! But in the midst of it one man, at least, was busy!

Sexton Blake! Up from that lonely graveyard, tucked away amid the towering buildings around it, he had clambered into the offices of The Worldwide Financial Syndicate, into Bryden Mitchelmore's private office.

Now here he was at work on the safe in the corner. Keys had been of no avail—well equipped though he was with all sorts of them—but with augur and brace and electric hoer, he had made good progress, and had got the safe door all but off its hinges.

Taking up a jemmy, he levered at it in a final effort. The heavy door fell aside, hanging by one hinge. The door was open; the shelves stood clear to view.

A cash-box stood on one, and bonds and securities on others. But these had no attraction for Sexton Blake. Though playing the part of burglar, he was not out for personal gain, but to aid the course of justice.

It was that big envelope he was after, and he searched for it. He found it, and drew it out from amid the pile of documents into which it had been thrust.

He tore open the sealed flap, and, stooping, spread the contents out, so as to scrutinise them by the light of the dark lantern he had placed upon the floor. A home-made map there was, and several rough plans with writing on them, and crude, but intelligible, sectional drawings.

Eagerly he looked at them, turning them over and about with feverish fingers.

For two or three minutes only! Then something quite unexpected was to happen!

It must have been some dim sound that made him start to rise to his feet, but before he could do so there came a dull noise like the muffled bursting of a bladder. At the same moment, a cloud of greenish vapour broke over his head, and wreathed in thick gusts about his eyes and nose and mouth!

Gasping, he attempted to hack clear of it—but in vain! In a second his throat and lungs were full of the gaseous vapour. A fit of coughing assailed him, but further in-drawn fumes prevented his giving vent to it. In a second he fell to the ground choking—in-capable of further breathing, either in or out. His head throbbled and throbbled as if it would burst, and his senses swam. Then they drifted right away, and he lay stretched out upon the floor, silent and still and unconscious!

For a minute or two, until the gaseous cloud and dispersed and drifted out through the open window, there was no sound or movement in that room.

But with the atmosphere clear, three strange men stepped forward towards where Blake lay. As they did so, they removed from their heads the gas-masks they had been wearing, while one of them began to pack away in a case a weapon shaped something like an old-fashioned horse pistol, but provided with a hell-mouthed muzzle, like a blunderbuss, and fitted with a rubber apparatus hanging below the trigger guard.

"Capital invention that gas-gun of yours, Phil!" remarked one of them, with a grin. "The very thing for members of our profession. Puts a man nicely to sleep without noise or fuss. Who is the chap? Boss of the show, do you think?"

"Not much, Sam. The boss wouldn't need to open his own safe with things like this," returned Phil Garlick, pointing to the tools Blake had used. "What do you say, Monty?"

"I say that he's a member of our own proferh," answered Monty Burns, which was

the name of the third man. "And on the same lay as ourselves. What you might call a strange coincidence, eh? Cracking the very same crib on the very same night as ourselves!"

"No, you're wrong!" gasped Sam Lack, the man who had first spoken, as, stooping, he drew away the unconscious man's false beard and wig. "This man's no crib-cracker. He's a tee!"

"Eh—eh, what?"

"Not a 'Yard' man, but the cleverest tec. in the world. I know him well. He's Sexton Blake!"

"Great Scott! Do you mean that, Sam?"

"I do. I'm positive sure about him."

"What can his game have been opening that safe?"

"I don't know; but a deep game, you can bet!"

He was looking at them papers there on the ground when we first spotted him. What can they be about?"

"Don't know. Pick 'em up, Monty. We must examine 'em later. Gather the rest of the swag together, too. That cash-box there and such of them other papers as look valuable. Get a move on! We must be clear of this show in five minutes. Sexton Blake may come round in that time!"

"What'll you do with him—leave him here?"

"No," answered Lack. "That 'ud be too risky. He'd give us the alarm, and the police would be after us in no time. We must take him with us. We can bundle him into this big sack. Quick, Phil! Into the street, and see if the coast is clear! Monty and I will follow with Sexton Blake directly you give us the signal."

Three minutes later, and they emerged by a side door into the court outside. Along this they walked, carrying Blake in a sack between them to a quiet street hard by, where a taxi-cab was awaiting them.

Into this they placed their burden and the swag, and then got in themselves. A minute after, and they were driving away. At the first corner stood a City policeman. He stared after the fleeing cab in surprise.

"Now where the dickens did that cab come from so suddenly?" he muttered to himself. "And what have the people inside been up to? No good, I'll bet!"

CHAPTER 18.

Sexton Blake's Ordeal.

WHEN Blake came to, it was to find himself lying on a couch in an upper room of a strange house.

What house it was he had no sort of idea. Nor did he know how long it was since he had been overwhelmed by the poison gas fumes in that office near Throgmorton Street.

He guessed, however—and he guessed aright—that it could not have been very long. The blind was up and the window wide open on this hot night, and it was still quite dark, save for the glow cast by

some queer twinkling lights from somewhere outside.

Red lights and green lights there were among them, and Blake noted the fact.

"This house must be alongside the railway," he decided. "I wonder what time it is."

He was about to feel for his watch, when he realised for the first time that he was bound hand and foot.

"So they mean to keep me prisoner!" he said to himself. "Wonder who they are? Belong to Mitchelmore's and Gulwood's gang, I suppose. If they do they're not likely to let me off very lightly! Wonder if it would be any good shouting, and so raising the alarm? No good just yet, anyway. I can hear footsteps. Somebody's coming! Perhaps now I shall learn something!"

His heart quickened a little as the door opened to admit three men. He looked up eagerly, to scan their faces. But of these he could see next to nothing, for two reasons. First, they brought but a feeble light into the room—a shaded lantern; and secondly, they wore crape masks, to hide their eyes!

"So you've come to, Mr. Sexton Blake!" was Sam Lack's exclamation, as he came near to him.

"Ha, you know me?"

"Very well, indeed. Dare say you'd remember me, too, if you could see me without this peeper-screen."

"I suppose you're in with Mitchelmore's lot?" queried Lack calmly.

"Mitchelmore? Who's he? Never heard of him. Oh, yes, I have, though! You must mean the boss of the office where we found you?"

"Of course I do! You know that well enough. I suppose he set you on to me?"

"Not much he didn't. We've nothing to do with Mitchelmore, or he with us!" returned Lack, in surprised tones.

"Then what's your game with me?" asked Blake, in equal surprise.

"We may answer that when you tell us what your game was in going there and breaking open that safe."

"Well, if you're nothing to do with Bryden Mitchelmore, I don't mind telling you that. I wanted to get a look at certain documents."

"These here, eh?" replied Lack, producing the big envelope. "We've been lookin' at 'em. Maps and plans and a lot of queer signs on 'em, but we can make neither head nor tail of it all. What's it all about, eh?"

"I know no more than you—less, in fact; for I've only had the merest glance at them. Now tell me, how came you to be at that place?"

"We went there in the ordinary course of business," returned Lack, with a grin.

"We heard as there was generally a tidy bit o' money kept in the safe, likewise bonds and stock certificates, and, altogether, we thought as it would be a crib worth crackin'."

"You went there for that? You weren't set on me?"

"Course we wasn't! Didn't dream anybody else was there, let alone you. It took us a back to see anybody there at such a time, and at first we thought it must be the caretaker, or somebody connected with the show. Then when we see you'd busted the safe and I recognised who you was, we was took aback some more. But you're goin' to tell us the meanin' of them maps and things?"

"I tell you I don't know what they're about. If I have a chance of studying them I may find out. Will you hand them over to me?"

"Not much," answered Lack drily. "You may pretend not to know what they are, but they must be valuable or you wouldn't have took so much trouble to get hold of 'em. And if they're valuable to you, why they're valuable to us. It might be worth this Bryden Mitchelmore's while to dub up something handsome for 'em, eh?"

And he winked cunningly.

"I should advise you not to try blackmail. It's a dangerous game," said Blake.

"Mean that you'd give us away?"

"I didn't say so."

"Better not think of doin' it, either, Mr. Sexton Blake," Lack answered, with a more vicious expression than he had hitherto worn, for the foregoing talk had been comparatively friendly. "If such a thing happened we should know who'd done it, and—well, we should get even with you for doin' it. Besides that, don't forget you're in our hands and that it's in our power to stop your mouth for ever here and now."

"Oh, I don't forget that," replied Blake, with a shrug of his shoulders, "but I don't think you'll do it!"

"Oh, don't you! And why not?"

"Because it would be a useless crime that would most certainly be brought home to you."

"That mebbe, or it mebbe not. But it 'ud be a useless crime, as you say. We ain't agoing to do you in, so you're right so far."

Blake breathed a little easier. In spite of easy-going, and at times even chafing nature of the conversation, he had had an uneasy feeling at the back of his mind as to his fate. These three men in whose power he was, were self-confessed burglars, and therefore men who were likely to stick at little that was inconvenient to them.

Besides that, in spite of their tale, he could not feel sure that they were not in Mitchelmore's pay, and that his kidnapping was part of a prearranged plot. The theory that they were just ordinary burglars, and that it was just a coincidence that they had chosen that particular time to break into Mitchelmore's office, was possible of course, but it seemed a little extraordinary, and might well be a faked story. It was therefore a distinct relief to hear that, at any rate, the worst was not to happen to him. The question then was, what was to happen to him?

"What are you going to do with me?"

he asked, in a careless tone, though his heart was beating a bit fast.

"Ah, that's the question," returned Lack. "Me and my pals have been talkin' it over and we've made up our minds. We don't want to keep you here, because you'd be in the way. So I'll tell you what we're goin' to do. In the first place we're goin' to put you to bye-bye."

"You're going to drug me again? Why do that?"

"Because we're going to take you a journey, and we want to take care you don't see which way you're taken. We don't want you to know whereabouts this house is, because if you did, it might be dangerous for us later on."

"Supposing I gave you my word of honour that I wouldn't hunt you down afterwards?"

"Ah, but you wouldn't do that. Mr. Sexton Blake?"

"I would—on one condition!"

"What's that?"

"That you hand me over those maps and plans."

Luck turned round with a laugh to his companions.

"What did I tell you, pals, that he'd say? Didn't I read his mind true and accurate? No, Mr. Blake, sir, them maps and things remain with us. They're our 'perks,' and we mean to make the most of 'em. You won't give us your word of honour without that?"

"No," replied Blake doggedly.

"Then we shall give you a dose to send you to sleep, drive you right clear out of London into the country, and set you down to recover in some lonely place. That'll stop you from havin' any inklin' of where you are now."

"Yes," chimed in Monty Burns, who, being of hatter temper than Luck, had grown irritated by the long confab. "And we'd better get to work at once. It's nigh on two o'clock. Now, then, Phil, bring out the dosing machine!"

Phil Garlick opened a cupboard and took out a sort of leather hood fitted with a cloth pad for mouthpiece. On to this pad he sprinkled something from a bottle, a sticky-looking substance which Blake did not recognise.

But he shuddered at the reek of it, and knew it for a powerful drug. To shudder was all he could do, for to resist was out of the question. There were three to one; besides that, he was bound hand and foot.

Submissively then he had to lie as they approached him, and submissively he had to allow them to clap the drugged pad over his mouth and nose.

Fortunately there was no pain attached to it—no more than the preliminaries of a dentist's chair. Two or three breaths and his senses grew numb; another and another, and consciousness passed clean away, and he sank into oblivion!

"Now for the cab!" exclaimed Monty Burns. "I'll have it round in a minute or two!"

But even as he moved towards the door,

something else occurred. Outside the open window came the approach of a train along the railway outside. A moment after, and there came the squeak of powerful brakes being applied.

Lack stepped to the window and looked out.

"The very thing!" he whispered hoarsely. "Less risky than the cab and just as good!"

"What do you mean?" asked Garlick.

"The train's stopped outside. A goods train. There's a roofed van right under this window! Look!"

"Well?" asked Garlick and Burns, in a breath as they looked out and saw the top of the van a few feet beneath them.

"We can drop him on to the top of that as easy as winkin', and he'll be carried to wherever the train's goin'. Twig?"

"Why, yes," assented Garlick. "And it's a good notion!"

"Quick, then—a rope before the train moves on!"

CHAPTER 19.

Searching for His Prison House.

THE train had moved on now, with the unconscious body of Sexton Blake lying on top of that goods van.

Through black and grimy tunnels it had gone for some time, for the section of line on which it had begun its journey formed part of the old District system.

Blake, of course, did not know this nor anything about it. He knew nothing of what had happened to him; of the alterations of the hurglers' plans; of the point from which he had started; of the direction in which he was being carried; or of the time the journey had taken. That drug had done its work thoroughly, and held him deeply unconscious in its potent grip.

It was well perhaps that it was so thorough in its action. For the top of the van on which he lay was not flat, but gently rounded. This made his position one of no small peril. So long as he lay quite still he was fairly safe, although the jolting of the train was a danger in itself.

But had he been coming to and and obeyed the instincts of a man slowly returning to consciousness by moving, then surely he would have been pitched right off and his end would have come!

As it was, he travelled on and on and on without his having the slightest inkling of what was happening. Nor, although the train stopped at various stations to take up other empty vans, was the presence of the detective on the top of the van noticed.

Not until the train had arrived at Steeple Wood, a little place lying some twenty miles out of London, on the very fringe of the outer suburbs, was he discovered!

It was dawn by then, and the train, being pulled up in a siding, Jim Haines, a boy porter, was engaged in parading the roofs of the various vans to remove the old-fashioned oil lamps which had been placed in several of them.

To come upon a strange man lying still and quiet on the top of a railway-van in the dawn of the morning is a thing calculated to startle. Consequently, it was not surprising that young Jim Haines, coming on the figure of Sexton Blake suddenly in the dim, uncertain light, should first give vent to a scream, and then hacking to the extreme end of the van, should call aloud to another porter in a terrified voice:

"Summat's happened! Here's a dead man lyin' atop of this van!"

"A wotter?" sang out Frank Eales, the other and older porter.

"A dead man!"

"Come off it," returned Eales. "This ain't the first of April, and if it was, that sort o' joke ain't permitted on this line!"

"I ain't jokin'," answered Jim Haines, in a very shaking voice. "I ain't jokin', 'srauth and honour!"

Impressed by the boy's white face and trembling frame, Fred Eales clambered on to the top of the van. He had fought in France had Fred, and had won the M.M. at Vimy Ridge, so wasn't a man afraid to face a live enemy, let alone a dead fellow-countryman.

He caught his breath at sight of the still figure lying there in the gloom, but approached unhesitatingly and bent over him.

"He ain't dead, thank Heaven!" he murmured reverently. "Don't think he's been hurt, either. But he's senseless, poor chap, and that means there's been crooked work somewhere! We must get him off here and get a doctor to him at once! Jim, jump down and fetch somebody to lend a hand."

Having got over his first scare young Jim was all eager to help. Jumping off the van, he ran along to the station near by, and quickly returned with three other men.

In a very few minutes Sexton Blake was lifted down and gently carried to the waiting-room. Once there a doctor was fetched and promptly arrived.

He administered restoratives, but without any immediate effect.

"He's been drugged," was his verdict. "He'll have to sleep it off. He'll come to

in two or three hours I think, and then he'll be all right."

It was about five o'clock in the morning when Blake, having first opened his eyes and gazed wonderingly about him, was able to learn from the police and railway people who had assembled around him, how and in what condition he had been found.

Having taken another medical draught which served to revive him wonderfully, he began to ply his questions, and from the answers he got learnt that he was at Steeple Wood, a place some twenty miles out on the north-western side of London.

"I must have been put on the top of the train by those villains," he said, for he had already explained something of how he had fallen into the hands of the burglars. "Before they drugged me, they told me they were going to drive me out of London in a cab, but they must have changed their minds and chosen the train method instead. Come to think of it, the railway did seem to run alongside the house in which they shut me up!"

"You don't know where the house was, sir?" asked one of the policemen present.

"Haven't the faintest notion. It was right in London, though. I could guess that from the nearness of the houses to the railway line. The exact whereabouts of the house is what we shall have to find out."

"Tough job that, sir. You see, we don't know how long you were on that van, and you can't tell us. You may have come a long way. Anyway,

that van you were on came a good forty miles."

"As much as that?"

"So the railway people here say."

"Well, it makes it difficult, but still we may be able to find that house. Where did the train start from?"

"From Barking in Essex!" answered a railway porter.

"Right out in the east end of London. What route did it follow to get here? Got a railway map?"

"I'll get one, sir."

He hurried away, and presently returned with a map and the schedule of the train by which Blake had come. From this Blake quickly discovered that the train had come

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from Barking on the Tilbury line, had joined the District system at Whitechapel, had journeyed to Aldgate where it had traversed the Inner Circle to Gloucester Road and then to Kenelington. From there it had been shunted on to another system, and after skirting north-west London, had ultimately come to anchor, so to speak, at Steeple Wood.

"Good!" exclaimed Blake. "Excellent! clear and precise! Now I shall be able to set about searching for that house."

"Don't see how you'll do it, sir," remarked a mystified policeman.

"I think it might be done," was Blake's answer.

Already he had formed a plan in his mind.

But before putting his plan into execution, he needed another disguise, that with which he had set out on his mission overnight having been torn from him by his captors. He, therefore, at once returned to Baker Street.

Tinker had been very anxious at his prolonged absence, and was greatly relieved to see him again safe and sound. He listened to Blake's story open-mouthed, but resolutely refused to believe that the gang were ordinary burglars.

"I can't swallow that, sir," he declared. "They must have been in Mitchelmore's pay and were put on specially to capture you."

"I thought that might be so at first, laddie, but I don't now for two reasons."

"What are they?"

"In the first place, how could Mitchelmore have known of my intended visit to his office at midnight?"

"He may have spotted you when you went there as an insurance agent, and seen you lurking about that old churchyard afterwards. That would have made him suspicious, and prompted him to set a trap for you."

"Good reasoning, Tinker—quite good, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough. If Mitchelmore had suspected my intention to burgle the safe, he'd have removed the maps and plans from it for certain."

"H'm, I suppose he would," assented Tinker, rubbing his nose.

"Apart from that, my second reason is still more unassailable. If those men had really been in Mitchelmore's pay they'd never have set me free as they did. They'd have kept me a close prisoner. No, I'm inclined to believe they really were burglars, and that it was just a mere coincidence that brought them to the office at the very time I was here. But we ought to know that for certain in a few hours."

"How?"

"If Mitchelmore did not set the trap for me you suggested, he'll be surprised when he finds his safe has been burst open, and will report the burglary to the police!"

"Think he will?"

"Almost certain. Especially when he finds those plans are missing. I fancy they're very valuable to him."

"What are they about?"

"Can't say for certain. I got but a mere glimpse of them before those villains gassed me. But from one or two things I saw, I fancy they had to do with mining operations!"

"Mining operations, eh? How comes Mitchelmore to be interested in anything like that?"

"As the head of a big financial corporation, he's interested in anything with money in it. As to the papers being valuable, I'm sure of that from the care he took of them and the talk I overheard in the restaurant between him and Gulwood. Anyway, I'm going on to see the police in anticipation of his visit to them."

"Will he go to Scotland Yard?"

"That's hardly likely. He's more likely to go to the Central Office of the City Police. It's on their beat, you know. I just want to change my appearance a bit and have some breakfast, then I'll get along. You can come with me. I may want you."

Blake timed himself to arrive at the City Police Headquarters soon after ten o'clock. He couldn't have arrived at a better time, nor could his forecast of Mitchelmore's probable action have been more accurately fulfilled.

Cloaked with Chief-inspector Canning, he had hardly given him an outline of his overnight adventures, than a police clerk entered the room.

"Excuse me, sir," he announced, "but we've just been rung up on the phone. There's been a burglary at the offices of the Worldwide Financial Operations Syndicate in Lucifer Lane, off Throgmorton Street!"

Chief-inspector Canning gave a quick, short laugh.

"Well, I'll be hanged, Mr. Blake, if your prophecy wasn't wonderful. It's fulfilled already."

Then he turned to the police clerk.

"All right. I'll go round myself and take Sergeant Tallboys with me. Ask him to come to me!"

"Let me come with you, too?" asked Blake.

"Certainly, if you think Mitchelmore won't recognise you."

"Well, you didn't," laughed Blake. "and you know me a deal better than Mitchelmore does. I want to come with you and beard this financial lion in his den. I may pick up some information."

"Right—ho, come along by all means."

Blake and the two officers at once went on to Lucifer Lane, while Tinker remained to await their return.

They found Bryden Mitchelmore in a rare state when they arrived. He was almost beside himself with excitement.

"It's a most serious affair," he exclaimed, "It may mean the loss of millions to me."

"Serious as that, sir?" queried Canning. "What was taken? Much money?"

"Oh, it isn't the ready cash," fumed Mitchelmore. "There was some in the cash-box—sixty or seventy pounds—but it isn't that that's worrying me. Nor the bonds and stock certificates that were taken

either. They represent a few thousands, but they don't greatly matter. It's the other things that were stolen!"

"What were they, sir?"

"Well, I needn't go into details," said the financier in some slight embarrassment. "But they were certain papers—mainly maps and plans and drawings—contained in a big envelope of stout buff cartridge paper. I'll willingly offer a thousand pounds reward for the safe return of those!"

"I'll make a note of that, sir," returned the Chief Inspector. "Now have you any sort of clue to the thieves?"

"Fortunately, yes. The man who opened the safe left quite a considerable number of finger-prints behind. Look at them!"

"Very clear and distinct," exclaimed Canning, examining the marks. "Those ought to be of great assistance, eh, Inspector Tyrrell?"

"Very great," assented Blake, who had been introduced to Mitchelmore as Inspector Tyrrell. "They ought to enable us to lay hands on the thief in no time"—he sank his voice to a whisper as he added confidentially to Canning—"considering the finger-prints are mine!"

Canning caught the words and the covert wink which accompanied them, but, of course, he was far too wary to give any sign. On the contrary, he turned to his subordinate with a stern face.

"Sergeant Tallboys, make arrangements to have these finger-prints photographed and referred to Scotland Yard at once!"

"Yes, sir!" replied Tallboys, and took his departure, to return later on with the police photographer.

Blake and Canning remained sometime longer, questioning Bryden Mitchelmore and making a thorough examination of the place. When at length they quitted the office and reached the street again, Blake gave a little laugh.

"There may be other fingerprints for Tallboys to photograph that may be valuable," he said. "But in regard to mine, I can see myself being arrested. I think I'll go on to Scotland Yard and explain. It'll save them time searching."

"You needn't trouble," said Canning. "I'll 'phone through if you like!"

"No," I'll call. I rather want to see Inspector Conover."

Reaching Scotland Yard with Tinker, they were lucky enough to find Detective-Inspector Conover in. He laughed when Blake told him the story of the burglary and that it was likely his finger-prints would later on that day be submitted for investigation.

"All right, Mr. Blake," he said. "We won't trouble about them when they arrive. But talking of finger-prints, I've got rather a puzzle in hand at the moment. Connected with the Marble Arch affair, too!"

"Eh, have you though?" cried Blake, all attention in a moment, for, in spite of what looked like side-developments, his main interest had never wavered from the central mystery he had set out to solve. "What finger-prints are they?"

"Found on the nap of one of the dead men's hats!"

"Which man?"

"The one you say was Bernard Ulswick!"

"On the tailor's evidence I have little doubt that was his name."

"That may or may not be," said Conover, with a touch of his old jealousy at not making the discovery himself. "We'll call him Ulswick for convenience. Anyway, these finger-prints were found on the nap of his brand-new silk hat!"

"Have you identified them?"

"I have not. And for a very good reason. We've no such prints in our collection, and we've searched thoroughly."

"How do you think the prints got there? It isn't usual to handle a silk hat by anything but the brim?"

"That's quite true. But I've discovered from Albert Moy, who of course is still in custody, that as Ulswick alighted from his cab that day, his hat fell off. Somebody picked it up for him and placed it on his head. It had been raining and the hat was wet."

"That accounts for the finger-prints showing so clearly and lasting so long, eh?" said Blake.

"And maybe accounts for something else," remarked Conover with one of his shrewdest looks. "You've won a great reputation for your deductive powers, Mr. Blake, but I flatter myself I can reason, too. Now what I reason is this: That jamming Bernard Ulswick's hat on suddenly in a crowd, gave the man who did it, just the opportunity he wanted."

"Opportunity for what?"

"To dig that poisoned needle into the back of his neck!"

"Excellent, Inspector, excellent! Pity you can't identify those finger-prints. It might mean the solution of at least half the mystery!"

At this point Tinker whispered something to Blake that made the latter give a jump.

"By Jove, yes!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten that for the moment. May I look at the finger-prints, inspector?"

"Certainly, here they are!" And Conover drew a photograph from a drawer.

Blake looked at it first with his naked eye and started. Then he looked at it through his lens intently for a moment, and exclaimed:

"Wonderful! There's no mistaking those florid whorls on the end of the middle finger—no mistaking them at all!"

"What on earth do you mean?" gasped Conover.

"I'll show you!" and drawing a small tin box from his pocket, Blake displayed the severed finger—which he had treated with spirit for preservation purposes—to Conover's amazed sight.

"A man's finger-joint!" he said breathlessly.

"A man's finger-joint! An impression-pad, please!"

Conover produced a pad of powdered wax. In silence Blake pressed the top of the severed finger on it.

"Compare the impressions!" he said.
Conover did so, then panted:
"The same—the very same! Whose finger is this?"

"Mr. Francis Gulwood's!"
"Good heavens! Then he must have picked up Bernard Ullswick's hat?"

"Undoubtedly!"
"Then it proves—"

"It proves that Francis Gulwood was at Marble Arch when Ullswick died, and that his evidence about seeing a Spaniard at Euston that told so heavily against Albert Moy was all false!"

"Pon my soul it looks like it!"
"Ultimately it may prove a great deal more, but for the moment we'll leave it at that!"

"Where is Gulwood?"
"I don't know. He's sloped."
The amazed Conover whistled.

"Sloped! You seem to have been after him already? Tell me about it?"

Blake told him as much as was necessary of what had happened at Wildharrow.

"My word!" the Scotland Yard man said. "His doing a guy makes it look bad for him! What with one thing and another, I begin to think you were right about him from the start," Conover said with no trace of jealousy now.

"I think so!"
"I'm sorry now I didn't row in with you from the start, Mr. Blake, as the chief hoped we should."

"Well, it's not too late now. If you care to lend me a hand, I shall be more than happy."

"In finding Gulwood?"
"That must be our ultimate object, but the immediate one is to find the missing maps and plans I've told you about!"

"Isn't that getting off on a side track?"
"It may look like it, but I don't think it is. I imagine that if we find those papers they may throw a light on the motive for the double tragedy at Marble Arch."

"I don't see how, but I'm quite ready to take your word for it. I'll lend you a hand with pleasure. But how are you going to set about finding the house where those fellows shut you up?"

"By going over every inch of the journey that the train went yesterday, and examining every likely spot for a clue."

"How'll you do that?"
"Get the railway company to take us round on an engine!"

"That's a good idea, but it's likely to be a tedious and difficult task!"

"That maybe, but I see no other way for it. If you're ready, we'll get along to the railway people at once!"

CHAPTER 20.

Attacking the Enemy's Stronghold.

ALWAYS ready to assist the ends of justice, the railway officials at once fell in with Blake's suggestion. They not only placed an engine—with a coach connected to it—but ordered the

attendance by telephone of the driver and guard who had worked the train on which Blake had been found unconscious.

With these two the detective arranged that they should follow exactly the programme of the previous journey, stopping at all places where they had stopped before, in order that Blake and his companions should have time to look round.

These stopping places were not necessarily to include stations, because Blake had decided it as unlikely that he had been placed aboard from one of them, but that he had been lowered directly from one of the windows of the house in which he had been confined. In this, as the reader knows, he was quite correct.

The addition of a coach to the engine had been at his suggestion, and he had proposed it for a special purpose. He had resolved that if he should succeed in finding the house, they should at once raid it.

With Inspector Conover approving this idea, over a dozen burly plain-clothes men were stowed away in the coach ready for a raid or for any other emergency that might occur. Blake, Tinker, and Conover themselves rode in the coal bunker of the engine—which had been partly cleared to leave plenty of room for them. By this means they were placed quite close behind the driver and fireman.

With no means of knowing at what point the house stood, it was necessary to go over the whole ground. Because, while the character of the room in which Blake had lain suggested a good-class house in a good neighbourhood, and therefore somewhere towards the west of London, the detective knew quite well that the East End also contained houses quite as substantial. These were notably in the neighbourhoods of Bow and Stepney, and had been built when those districts had been pleasant suburban residences of City merchants and shipowners and prosperous sea captains of the old school.

So, having made their way to Barking, the party started on their ominous journey from there.

Several halts were made between there and Aldgate, and examinations made of their surroundings. And here it may be stated that the slackest part of the day had been selected, and one or two not much used trains suspended, in order to facilitate their task.

No clue was, however, found eastward of the City—nothing like a clue. Nor did the journey through the howels of the City itself reveal anything. This, however, did not surprise Blake, knowing as he did that the City was mainly offices and business premises with very few private residences.

It was not indeed till the search train had got westward of St. James's Park that he began to feel they were on really likely ground.

For hereabouts, in the neighbourhood of Pimlico and beyond, the tunnels, which had been continuous beneath the City itself, became far more sectional. That is to say, they were broken up into short subterranean grooves, freely interspersed by lengths of

ground open to the sky—"air-spaces" as they are called.

Soon after passing one of these, and on diving into a tunnel beyond, the driver slowed up and stopped.

"Hullo?" asked Blake. "What's this for? Did you pull up here on that other train?"

"I did, sir. Not exactly on this spot, but very close. Fact is, there was a couple of empty trucks that we had to pick up from the blank guiley there!"

"Which is the guiley?" Blake inquired.

"Single line of metals running back yonder."

"Pretty rusty. Not much used, eh?"

"No, sir. Line was found to be too near the houses. Shook 'em too much, so a new line was laid further out. That one's only used now and then, and mainly for stowage of empties."

Sexton Blake glanced back through the tunnel and beyond, and his heart quickened as he caught sight of a line of tall houses towering on the very edge of the rusty metals.

"A likely spot!" he thought. "Might easily have been one of those houses where I was shut up. It would be quite easy to lower a body from one of the first-floor windows, and if I had to guess, I should say it was the first floor I was on!"

He turned to the driver with questions.

"How long was that other train?"

"Difficult to say exactly, sir. We picked up so many trucks on the way."

"Well, roughly?"

"Oh, roughly I should say a hundred and fifty yards long."

"And what part of the train was the truck on which I was found? Somewhere in the middle wasn't it?"

"Bit further back than that, I think, sir. About two-thirds along."

"Call it a hundred yards," said Blake thoughtfully, with another backward glance at the houses. "Wait here driver, if you can."

"Can't if you're likely to be long, sir. There's another train to come through in a few minutes. But I could arrange at the signal-box to get shunted into the guiley there."

"Then do so. We may be some little time," replied Blake as he climbed into the tunnel.

Tinker noticed the brightness in his master's eyes.

"You seem very eager, sir?"

"I feel somehow that we're getting warmer!" And he gave still another long look at the row of tall houses.

"You think it might be one of them?" asked Inspector Conover, following his glance.

"I do. Now then, I'm going to pace out a hundred yards. If it was one of those houses, that'll bring us close to the spot, within a few yards one way or the other. Keep close under the wall so as to escape observation from the houses."

They obeyed, following in Indian file after Blake as he paced out the required distance.

"Here we are!" the detective said, as he

halted at the end of the hundred yards. "Now I wonder what there is to be seen?"

He backed away from the lower bed of concrete on which the houses were built. The wall ran up, blank and steep, for a height of about five yards. After that the houses themselves began.

These were built in terrace form, with the windows of the ground floor built very high up and fast closed to escape the steam of passing trains. The first floor windows were larger and some fourteen feet above.

It was on these that Sexton Blake fixed his eyes as he began moving slowly forward.

"Remain here!" he whispered to Tinker. "I may have to come back!"

He had. For after going quite sixty yards further along he returned.

"No sign that way—no sign at all!"

"What do you expect to find?" asked the mystified Conover.

"I'll tell you if and when I find it," returned Blake with a grim smile. "We must try backward now!"

Slowly he started to retrace his steps towards where they had dismounted from the engine. Hardly had he gone a dozen paces, the while his gaze never left the line of first-floor windows, that he caught Inspector Conover by the arm.

"There!" he whispered. "That's what I hoped to find!"

"I—I see nothing!"

"Yes, you do. That mark on the window-sill up there!"

"Yes, I see that. What is it?"

"Made by a rope! The sill's blackened by the smoke and dust of years, and it's been rubbed clean by a rope with a heavy weight attached!"

"You mean——"

"I mean that that's the window from which I was lowered. I could almost swear to it! Look at the blackened wall below, too. Those partly-cleared patches. If my body didn't cause those by bumping against it, I'll turn cannibal and eat it."

"By Jupiter! But I think you may be right!" exclaimed Conover in an excited undertone. "What are we to do now?"

"Fetch your men from the coach on the siding there. Plant half of them here to watch the back of this house. The rest of them will go round with us to the front. Find out the name of the road on the other side. The engine-driver will probably know."

The engine-driver knew the geography of his daily journeys pretty thoroughly.

"He says it's Crindle Street!" said Conover, as he trooped back with his men, and deputed half of his men to watch the rear of the place.

"Good! Then we make for Crindle Street at once!"

"How are we to know which house it is from the front?"

Blake pointed to the top of a neighbouring house.

"Two houses to the left of those queer chimney-pots. Come on. There's a bridge back there that should lead us clear of the railway."

He was right. By climbing up the girders on to the footbridge they reached a narrow passage which brought them out at the end of a road.

"Here we are—Crimble Street!" exclaimed Blake, pointing up at the painted name.

"Now for the house!"

They found it, with the odd-looking chimneys for a guide, without any difficulty.

"No. 31," Blake said as they mounted the three steps.

Inspector Conover stood beside him, the remainder a bit away from the house so as not to attract undue attention.

"We'll knock," the Scotland Yard man said. "We must give them a chance to admit us peacefully if they like; not that I expect they will."

"No, it's hardly likely," answered Blake drily. "For letting me go as they did I should have been inclined to deal leniently with them. But I don't forget that they threatened to do me in if I tried to hunt them down, so I expect they'll show fight if they're in. One of them was fairly decent, but the other two seemed to be out and out scoundrels. There may be others in the gang, too."

"Perhaps we shall soon know. Anyway, we're ready for anything!" said Conover.

There was no bell, but there was a heavy knocker, and on this the inspector gave a prolonged rat-tat-tat!

It echoed all through the house, but of other sounds there seemed to be none.

"Out, apparently!" observed Conover, and knocked again.

Still there came no answer or any sign that anyone was inside.

"What had we better do?" asked the Scotland Yard man. "Force the door?"

"No, there's an easier way," Blake replied, pointing to the area. "That window there. We could break a pane and slip back the catch!"

"Right-ho! We'll do that! It's all the better if nobody's in. After all, it's those papers we want chiefly, not these men!"

He beckoned to his subordinates to come nearer, then with Blake descended the area steps.

Drawing a short truncheon from his pocket, he dealt a smart tap on one of the centre panes. There was a tinkle of falling glass, and in a moment his hand was through the hole to force back the catch.

Another five seconds and the sash was raised, and he and Blake stood inside. Where they were was a sort of small breakfast-room, with a door giving on to the basement passage.

With another wave of the hand as a signal to those outside to be in readiness in case of emergency, Conover followed Blake through this door. No sooner were they there than

Bang! came a shot.

"Back!" whispered Blake, as a bullet whizzed close past his head. "They are in, and they mean mischief!"

He stepped back and aside into another room opposite to that by which they had entered. It was a sort of scullery or other

annex to the kitchen, for the walls were hung with several large, solid, metal dish-covers, and other appurtenances to the dinner-table.

"Ah, these may be useful!" Blake exclaimed, taking down one of the dish-covers. "They will help to keep off the bullets if it comes to a fight!" And he held it before him by the handle, so that it formed a big, hollow shield.

"Good notion!" said Conover, and seized another. "Hullo! Look out! They're coming!"

But the rush of steps in the passage were not those of the enemy, but of their own men.

"We heard that shot, sir, and thought we'd better come in!" the leader explained.

"Quite right! It seems as if you'll be wanted. Each man take one of those things!" And he pointed to the range of dish-covers.

"Reminds me of the old tin hats in Flanders!" remarked a young constable, who had only recently been demobilised, to his companions.

Blake and Conover were conferring as to their plan of action. On this they soon decided.

"Follow us!" the inspector commanded. "One at a time—not in a bunch!"

He stepped out on the heels of Blake, who made for the stairs leading up to the ground-floor.

Bang! came another shot as he mounted.

Up went the shield in a moment to deflect the revolver-bullet on its hard face, and to cause it to bury itself in the wall.

He pressed on, expecting further shots, but none came. Instead, there was a rapid scurrying of feet up to the higher regions of the house.

"Ha!" whispered Blake, as they reached the ground-floor landing. "They've abandoned their first line already. Now to attack the second!"

A broader staircase faced them now. Blake and Conover faced this abreast, followed by some of the policemen. They expected further shots now, but none came. Instead, something else even more alarming happened!

For, while Blake and Conover were but little more than halfway up the rather long staircase, there came a sudden squeak of mechanism from somewhere overhead!

In a second, and without any further warning, the whole flight of steps heaved upward and outward, then, with a jerk, canted up into a vertical position, hurling everybody violently off in a moment!

Only by a miracle did Blake and Conover, who were highest up, save themselves from disaster!

But at the first suggestion of movement, Sexton Blake had shrieked out: "Jump!"

Both he and Conover had jumped, and could now be seen clutching desperately at the banisters, and suspended for the time being in mid-air.

As to the other police-officers, they had been thrown to the ground, but as the height from which they had been hurled was not very great, the most serious casualty sustained was a ricked ankle by one of them,

while the rest escaped with sundry bumps and bruises.

In a second or two Blake and Conover had dropped to the ground.

"Queer go!" the latter said, breathing quickly, for the shock had been considerable. "How did it happen?"

"Staircase made to work on a leverage system," replied Blake, pointing to some steel work that stood revealed behind the stairway. "I've seen similar things before; the most wonderful was in a gambling-den at Marseilles. It shows the character of the people living here to have such a thing specially provided."

"Yes, the villainous curs! One thing, they're upstairs, so they can't escape us. We'll nab 'em if it means waiting here a month to starve them out!"

"Oh, we'll get them," Blake answered. "But I'm not inclined to wait a month, or anything like it. We must tackle them straight away!"

"How are we to get at them?" asked Conover, with a blank look at the perpendicular staircase. "Our retreat—or, rather, advance—is cut off!"

"We must get a ladder! There's room to prop it against the landing beside the stairway. Send a couple of your men for one!"

Two men departed at Conover's bidding. Some painters were at work on a neighbouring house, and from these the policemen commandeered a long, stout ladder, and brought it back to the house.

By breaking the banisters away there was just room to prop this against the upper landing. That done, Blake at once began a cautious ascent. In a minute he was on the landing. Conover followed, and then four policemen, one after the other.

Either the gang remained unaware of this move, or, knowing of it, had retired to an upper room, determined to make their great fight there. Anyway, they did not put in an appearance.

Blake was not sorry for this. Providing he could get hold of those papers, he would not trouble about the men. Conover, as a police-officer, would, naturally, not share his view, but, personally, he would not mind if the men went free for the time-being.

"That's the room where I was shut up," he whispered, pointing across the landing. "I rather fancy the papers may be in there. We'll search for them, anyway."

They entered the room—all of them. Blake deemed it better so than to leave any of their party on guard on the landing, in case of a chance shot from the villains above.

Then they began their search, first turning their attention to a desk which stood in one corner against the wall, which seemed a likely place for the concealment of papers. So, with the door pushed to, they proceeded with their quest.

Where were the villains all this time? In the room immediately over their heads!

There they were, the same three whom we have seen before—Lack and Burns and Garlick. Sam Lack was looking deadly anxious, while the evil eyes of Monty Burns and Phil Garlick glittered with apprehension. Sexton

Blake might have spared his pity for them—which was prompted by their having let him go free—for evil and bitter thoughts of vengeance were in the hearts of all three.

Those bullets which they had fired had been meant to find a billet, and would have been followed by others, had they possessed them. But they had never dreamt of being discovered, and the police visit had come at a moment when they were short of ammunition.

"Curse our luck!" Phil Garlick was muttering. "If only we'd more cartridges, we'd have done the whole lot in."

"Well, we haven't," growled Lack, "so it's no use talking like that! Who would have thought that Sexton Blake would have tracked us down?"

"'Twas mad folly letting him go as we did!" muttered Burns. "We ought to have finished him off when we had the chance. As it is, he's turned the tables on us. We're caught like so many rats in a trap. The house is surrounded by the police back and front! We've no chance at all!"

"Hist!" said Lack suddenly. "I believe they're in the room below. Wait a second while I get a squirt!"

He turned back the big rug that lay before the hearth, and silently withdrew a long wedge of cork that filled a hole in the floor. The meaning of this became at once clear. The aperture was a spy-hole that gave a view of the room immediately beneath.

Lack had thrown himself flat down, with his eye glued to this.

"They're all inside the room," he whispered, after a brief survey. "All six of them, and that's the full number that came in at the area window. Monty, see if there are any more on guard in the street outside."

Burns tiptoed across the landing to a room in front. In a minute he came back.

"Only two policemen there," he told them. "And they're moving away, helping one of their companions who's got something wrong with his foot."

It was even as he said. At that moment the two remaining constables who had accompanied the party to the front of the house were engaged in removing to hospital the colleague whose ankle had been smashed when the stairway had tilted up.

"Watch 'em a minute!" said Lack, with an eager gleam in his eyes, "and report when they've got clean away!"

Burns tiptoed across the landing again. Once more he returned in a couple of minutes.

"Coast all clear!"

"Right-ho!" whispered Lack, whose eye had been again at the spy-hole. "And that lot all busy in the room below. Searching for those papers I expect."

"Which they won't find," said Garlick, tapping his breast-pocket. "I've got 'em safe here. But I suppose they'll attack us and get 'em presently!"

"Not if I know it," remarked Lack. "We may escape 'em yet if we're quick!"

"How?"

"By making a dash now while they're busy. Come on! Down the stairs like cats,

and past that door of the room where they are, and we ought to be all right!"

"You're forgetting the lower stairway; it's out of position."

"No, I'm not. One touch of the lever will right it. Quick! It's our only chance!"

They saw that, and nodded. Lack moved softly from the room, then crept down the upper flight, followed by the others, and all going stealthily as leopards! Liberty was very dear to them, and now it seemed to be within their grasp!

Engrossed by their work of searching—quite unsuccessful so far—Sexton Blake and the others heard nothing of those stealthy figures moving down the stairs and past their door, and that lower stairway been in proper position, it is possible that the gang might, indeed, have made their escape.

But it wasn't, and easy though it was to put it into proper position under ordinary circumstances, the operation was now to prove their undoing!

For the ladder, wedged on the dark side of the staircase, went unnoticed by them, and its presence prevented the stairway from falling into its proper groove, and made the levering-gear work faultily.

So it happened that a sudden sound of squeaking mechanism reached the ears of one of the constables nearest to the inner side of the door.

"Hullo, what's this?" he screamed out, as he threw open the door.

Sexton Blake looked up and saw what was happening in a moment.

"The gang trying to escape!" he yelled, and rushed out on to the landing, followed by Conover and the others.

It was a moment of terrific panic for the three villains, and panic generally causes calamity. It was to do so in this case.

For, finding themselves, so to speak, between the devil and the deep sea, Lack and Burns and Garlick made a simultaneous jump for the top step.

Too late—or, rather, too soon!

Working slowly by reason of the impeding ladder, the stairway had not yet fallen quite into position, and all three, misjudging the distance, missed their footing, slipped over the well, and—

No, they did not fall; there was no room to fall! Because, with Lack letting go of the mechanical release, the heavy staircase fell with a jerk, and there were all three firmly wedged between it and its osken bed, almost literally now caught like rats in a trap!

"Great heaven!" gasped Sexton Blake, appalled by the sight. "Grip hold of them while I release the stairs, or they'll be crushed to death in no time!"

Police officers dropped down on their knees to do his bidding, while Blake himself sprang to the lever! Pressing it, he caused the stairway to move upward and outward a few inches, then, as the police-officers drew the three men up clear, he let the stairs fall into their proper place.

He turned to where the three men had been laid on the landing. All were very

still, purple of face, and strangely battered in body.

In silence he and others examined them. In silence—and in vain—he placed his spirit-flask to their blue lips in turn!

In vain—in vain! No spirit or drug is there of man's making sufficiently potent to awaken the life in these men. For the life has fled, the spark has been extinguished! The three men are dead. They have been caught in the trap they had always used for others, and it has crushed the life out of them!

CHAPTER 21.

The Secret of the Plans!

A DOCTOR was at once sent for, of course, but he could do nothing save confirm the grim fact that the three men were dead.

Not until he had given his verdict was anything done by way of searching the bodies. Then at last Sexton Blake drew out from the capacious inside pocket of Phil Garlick a big buff envelope, which had attracted his attention.

"The plans I found in Bryden Mitchell's safe!" he exclaimed, drawing out the contents. "Shall I take care of these, or will you, inspector?"

"Oh, you had better have them for the time being, sir," answered Conover generously, for he had quite got over his jealousy now. "I know you're dying to examine them, and, besides, it's your stunt."

"Thanks! I do want to have a look at them," responded Blake. "I don't mind confessing that I hope to get considerable light from them. Will you come back to my chambers, and we'll go through them together?"

"I must see to the disposal of the three dead men first, and complete the search of these premises," answered Conover. "I'll join you at Baker Street to-night if you like—say at eight o'clock?"

"Right! By that time perhaps I shall be able to tell you something!"

With the precious envelope safely in his pocket, Blake at once returned with Tinker to Baker Street. Once within the privacy of his own chambers, the detective immediately got to work. For a couple of hours he remained engrossed in the various maps and plans, piecing them together—for they were in irregular sections—carefully examining every section, and then, with equal minuteness, surveying the lot as a whole.

During all this time he never spoke one word, nor did Tinker once break in upon his silent meditations. Eager as he was to learn the results of his master's investigations, he knew better than to inquire about them until they were more or less completed.

So he waited with wrist patience he could muster, and watched Blake's face incessantly as each section of the plans came under his close scrutiny.

And then at length the detective sank back in his chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

"At last," he exclaimed, "the secret's out—or part of it!"

"What is the secret, sir? What are those plans?"

"Of a silver mine!"

"A silver mine?"

"A veritable Eldorado—worth, seemingly, millions on millions of money!"

"And where is it?"

"In Peru—right among the mountains, some fifty miles from the town of Puno!"

"But where does the secret of it come in?"

"As to that, I cannot speak with certainty at the moment. I can only make a guess!"

"Your guesses are generally better than some people's certainties, gov'nor. What do you guess?"

"I guess that the double murder at Marble Arch was committed in order that Bryden Mitchelmore might get hold of these plans, for one thing!"

"What makes you think that? Why was it necessary to murder two men who seemingly had nothing to do with each other?"

"Because, as I believe, half of these plans were carried by Bernard Ullswick, and the other half by the ragged man!"

"What grounds have you for thinking that, sir?"

"The plans were prepared by two different men. The explanatory notes are in two different handwritings. Those in the one half I do not recognise. But the other half, beyond all doubt, is in the handwriting of the ragged man who was murdered!"

"Gov'nor, how do you know that?"

"By comparing the notes with that scrap of paper found on him at the time of his death! See for yourself!"

He laid the papers side by side. Tinker looked, compared them carefully for a moment, then shook his head vigorously.

"You're right, sir. Right, beyond all doubt. Wonder whether the other half of the plans are in Ullswick's writing?"

"It is impossible to say at present. They may or may not be. We shall have to wait for further evidence to say for certain. But what seems to me certain is this: That the secret of the mine was known to Ullswick and the ragged man, that each possessed half of the plans, that they had arranged to meet at Marble Arch in order to make arrangements for the working of the mine, and that somebody, knowing of this intended meeting, took steps to have both men done to death in order to become possessed of the plans. It is just possible that Inspector Conover may have discovered further papers, and may be able to shed additional light on the matter when he calls."

But when the Scotland Yard man arrived at eight o'clock that night he had nothing important to tell. Search of the house in Criddle Street, where the burglars lived, had certainly revealed a number of other documents, but while these were important in themselves, as providing evidence of the whereabouts of much property stolen in past burglaries, and detailed plans for future robberies, they shed no light on the Marble Arch mystery at all, and it was quite evident the burglars had not been connected with Mitchelmore in any way.

If Conover had nothing to tell, he had a good deal to listen to, and Blake's story filled him with astonishment.

"What is the next step to take?" he asked after he had heard it.

"To try and establish the identity of the ragged man!" Blake answered.

"How can we do that?"

"By going to Bryden Mitchelmore, and asking him pointblank for any information he may have!"

"But if he was an accessory to the double murder he'll tell us nothing?"

"Quite so. On the other hand, if the part he played was an innocent one, he'll prove his position and so help to clear the air. He's got a house near Buckingham Gate. We'll go there at once!"

But on calling at the house the servants informed them that nothing had been seen of Mr. Mitchelmore since the morning. It was likely he was at his club—the Parthenon—where he frequently went at night. But, as they found on going to the club, nothing had been seen of him there either.

"There's nothing to do but wait till the morning and tackle him at his office," said Inspector Conover, after a further vain search extending over two or three hours.

"We shall be lucky if we find him!" said Blake, with a shrug.

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Because, if I'm any judge of men and events, Bryden Mitchelmore has bolted!"

"Bolted?"

"I think so. I should advise you, Inspector, to wire to all the ports and have them watched!"

"Bit premature, isn't it?" asked Conover, opening his eyes.

"I hope it is, but I'm afraid not!"

Nor was it! When, the next morning, inquiries were made for Bryden Mitchelmore at his office nothing could be learnt of him nor of his movements. Later in the day, however, came news of a hurried packing of a bag and a journey to Victoria Station on the previous evening!

Blake's fears were verified. Beyond all doubt Mitchelmore had bolted. Evidently becoming aware that something ominous was happening, he had taken alarm, and, without a word to anyone, had vanished into the unknown!

The ports were watched, but watched in vain. For the time being Bryden Mitchelmore had got clean away!

CHAPTER 22.

Identified!

SEXTON BLAKE had another plan for getting at the identity of the ragged man, and now at once put it into execution.

He went to a process engraver with a specimen of the murdered man's handwriting, had a block made of it, and by this means got a facsimile of the writing reproduced in many London and provincial papers. In connection with this, he offered a sub-

stantial reward to anyone giving such information as would lead to the identity of the man whose handwriting it was.

Then he waited. For two or three days he got no reply. But on the following Tuesday a visitor called at his chambers in the person of a one-armed tramp named Henry Bateson.

In his hand he carried a copy of "The Sunday Pictorial," which he held out towards Blake as the latter asked him his business.

"Begg'n' yer pardon, sir, but it's about this reward, sir!" the man said, and pointed to the reproduced handwriting.

"Hullo, have you come to claim it?"

"That's it, sir; for I can prove beyond all reasonable doubt who wrote this 'ore writin'! It was a man named Robert Dexter, sir!"

"Robert Dexter—who was he?"

"A man I met in Parkwood's doss-house in the Borough, three or four months ago, sir."

"Is that so?" asked Blake, keenly interested. "Do you know anything about him?"

"Not a lot, but a little, sir. He wasn't much of a talker, wasn't Dexter, but he did open out to me once or twice. We slept next bed to one another, and now and agen when we couldn't sleep o' nights we'd talk. P'raps he talked to me a bit more'n to other people through my knowin' a little bit about the country he'd come from."

"Where was that?"

"Peru—South America, sir."

"Peru!" Only with difficulty did Blake restrain his excitement. "Did Dexter come from Peru?"

"He did, sir. And as I'd knocked about the Andes a bit before I come back to England to join the Army and lost this arm, he liked to have a bit of a chin-wag about it."

"What did he tell you?" Blake asked, pacing the room to hide his eagerness.

"Not a lot, but a bit. He told me more than once that he ought to 'ave bin a rich man instead of a beggar, but that he'd been scared out of Peru by a gang who'd murdered his pard and tried to do him in as well!"

"His partner had been murdered and his own life had been threatened?" exclaimed Blake, with glowing eyes and contracted brows, as he pondered over the slow unfolding of the hidden drama. "What was the nature of their partnership? What business were they in? Do you know that?"

"He never told me outright, sir; but, what with my knowledge of the country and the hint or two he dropped now and then, I could guess. It had summat to do with minin', I believe. Summat to do with prospectin', anyways."

Blake's eyes glowed more eagerly than ever as he glanced significantly at Tinker, who was present. This mention of minin', and the fact that Robert Dexter had lived in Peru, all helped to support his theory on the matter.

"Did you ever learn the name of his murdered partner?" was his next question.

"No, sir, I never did."

"Or the names of any of Dexter's former companions?"

"No, sir."

"Now tell me this: What makes you so certain that this handwriting in the newspaper is that of Robert Dexter?"

"Because I know it well, sir."

"Have you any specimens in your possession?"

"No, sir. But Dexter once wrote a letter for me, sir (me havin' lost my right arm), and I remember it well."

"What letter was that?"

"To the Pensions Office, sir. I'd had some trouble to get my Army allowance settled, so Dexter wrote about it for me."

"Did the letter go to the Central Pensions Office?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was that?"

"Can't give you the exact date, but it was about three months ago."

"Now answer me this: Why have you waited till now before coming forward? Why didn't you go to the police and identify Dexter at the time he was murdered?"

"Murdered! Robert Dexter murdered?" gasped Bateson, obviously staggered.

"Yes, with another man at Marble Arch a fortnight ago!"

"Poor Dexter! Poor Dexter!"

"His portrait was in all the papers at the time."

"I—I didn't see it, sir. I was on tramp in the North of England at the time, and I see no papers. 'Twas only by chance I see this one at Coventry on Sunday. I tried to get the money to bring me to London then, but it wasn't till last night I met a pal who lent me enough to pay the fare."

Blake eyed him keenly, and read the truth in his face. But it still remained to make assurance doubly sure.

"Would you recognise Dexter's portrait if I showed it to you?"

"Eay, sir."

"Then I'll show it you."

But Blake was ever cautious. He did not show Dexter's portrait alone, but displayed it among a dozen other newspaper photographs, carefully covering up the names.

The one-armed ex-soldier ran his eye over them. Then unhesitatingly he placed his finger on one of them.

"That's poor Robert Dexter, sir!" he declared.

"Good!" was Blake's answer. "It is a photograph of the man who was murdered at Marble Arch! You have earned your reward, and here it is!"

He handed the man a bundle of notes, then said:

"You may be wanted to give evidence later on. Please give me an address that will find you?"

"Parkwood's doss-house will find me during the next few weeks, sir. Gimp Street, Borough."

"Very good!"

And Blake, having made a note of it, the man departed.

Hardly had he gone than Blake put on his hat.

"Where are you off to, gov'nor?" Tinker asked.

"To the Central-Pensions Office to get that letter. It's pretty certain the murdered man was Robert Dexter, but I want to compare the handwritings so as to leave no doubt about it."

Government offices are not remarkable for efficiency or quick dispatch. Offices never are, where the job exists for the man instead of the man for the job, and there are three people to do one person's work.

Consequently, Sexton Blake had to wait some time before the letter he was after could be produced. But his patience outlasted official "smallery," and at last a paper was placed in his hand.

It was covered with some dozen or so sets of initials, and such powerfully intellectual phrases as "For your remarks, please," and "Passed to you, please"; but Blake wisely ignored these, and looked at the body of the letter itself.

And in a moment he saw what he had hoped to see. Namely, that the letter was in the same handwriting as that note which had been found in the pocket of the ragged man, and also of half of those plans of the Peruvian silver mine which had been found in Mitchellmore's safe!

Although delighted with his discovery, Blake did not at once return to Baker Street. He had another call to make—perhaps two—but certainly one. He wanted to visit the Free Library (which Tinker had found to be the meaning of those for-a-time puzzling initials, "F. L."), either at Pennithorne Street or Wolsley Road. It might be necessary to visit both, but Blake chose Pennithorne Street as being the nearer.

Going there he at once sought out the librarian and his assistant. Producing the portrait of Robert Dexter, he asked them if they ever remembered seeing such a man in the library. The librarian shook his head, but his assistant, without being at all sure, had a dim recollection of seeing the face before.

"I fancy he came one evening into the newsroom, sir, but I can't swear to him. We have so many here. And, somehow, I don't think his hair was so long as that, or his beard so ragged!"

"How long was it ago?"

"Oh, a considerable time, sir. Three or four months, it might be."

"Plenty of time for hair to lengthen and a beard to grow ragged," thought Blake. Then he asked: "You take all the daily papers here, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"And file them?"

"We file the 'Times,' and keep it. Most of the others we dispose of when they are a month old."

"May I see your file of the 'Times'?"

"Certainly, sir. I'll fetch it."

The big sheet of newspapers was presently placed before Blake, and for an hour or more he remained turning them over and studying one particular column in each issue—the Personal or "Agony" column.

He began at a date some four months back, and worked forward. For a time he found nothing. Then all of a sudden his eyes were arrested by this:

"R. D., formerly of Puno, Peru. Shall come to England within next few months, but cannot give exact date of sailing yet. If you care to trust me with your half, send on to Hotel Maxse, Buenos Ayres. If not, keep plans till we meet. In any case, above address will find me for the next two months. Send yours.—B. U."

"R. D." and "B. U."! What else could these initials signify than the names of Robert Dexter and Bernard Ullswick? And what else could the "your half" refer to than that part of the plans which bore evidence of Dexter's handwriting?

A flood of light broke in on Blake's mind as he thought of this and other things. He continued his search of the newspaper file, but without finding any further message.

This did not greatly disappoint him, for he had hardly expected to find any. Following the insertion of the one he had read, Dexter had probably written to the Hotel Maxse at Buenos Ayres, while Ullswick in his turn had most likely answered him at whatever address he had given.

Dexter had probably refused to part with his half of the plans, and, in order to combine them with the half in his own possession, he had arranged by correspondence to come to London and to meet Dexter.

"But what a queer place to meet at—Marble Arch?" said Tinker, when, on Blake's return to Baker Street, he told him of his discoveries.

"Well, I don't know. Ullswick may not have been aware of Dexter's exact circumstances. But he must have gathered that he was living in poverty, and, as we know, his only abode was Parkwood's or some other such place. Now, a doss-house is not the most convenient rendezvous for a confidential discussion of secret plans, so they arranged to meet at Marble Arch. From there they would probably have sought out some secluded spot in Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens. Afterwards, having compared the plans and found them satisfactory, Ullswick would most likely have financed Dexter, and arranged for his obtaining an outfit and better accommodation. Then they would have gone on with the arrangement of further developments with regard to the mine."

"Instead of which, somebody else heard about the mine, and resolved to get hold of the plans?"

"Yes; and that means that Ullswick's movements must have been shadowed and his arrangements known. Somebody must

have betrayed him to Mitchelmore, or whoever it was that engineered the plot."

"Who could have betrayed them?"

"That remains to be found out. When we have found it out, and got hold of the correspondence between Ullawick and Dexter (supposing it still exists), we shall, I think, hold the key to the whole mystery."

"There's one thing I can't quite grasp, sir. Why did they wait to murder and rob both men at the same time and in the same public place? Supposing they shadowed Ullawick from America, as you suggest, why didn't they rob him on the voyage?"

"Because, had they done so, Ullawick would have immediately apprised Dexter, and so put him on his guard."

"But if they had killed Ullawick aboard the ship, instead of waiting?"

"His death would have reached the ears of Dexter, who would have been immediately suspicious, and taken greater care of his half of the plans than ever! No; in order that the conspiracy should be entirely successful, it was necessary to carry it out in one coup. Hence both men were carefully shadowed until they were on the point of meeting, and both done to death at the same time!"

"The murderers must have known they were carrying the plans with them?"

"Undoubtedly. That's what makes me so certain that they had been betrayed. They must have arranged by correspondence to bring the plans with them, and the nature of that correspondence must have been known to somebody else. Who, I can't yet say."

"Supposing the letters to be still in existence, who do you think is likely to have them?"

"Bryden Mitchelmore or Francis Gulwood. They seem to have been the principals in the plot. Find one of them, or both, and we shall be nearly at the end of our task!"

CHAPTER 23.

The Clue of the Crumpled Glove!

BUT to find either Mitchelmore or Gulwood proved to be a far from easy task. In spite of a close watching of the ports, nothing had been seen of the financier, while the most exhaustive inquiries all over the country failed to reveal any trace of him.

As to Gulwood, he, too, had vanished as completely as his associate in crime, and not only the police, but Blake also, began to despair of ever finding them.

By this time it had been proved conclusively that the racehorse Swiftwing—central figure in the affair at Gathbury races—had been the victim of foul play, and, by order of the Jockey Club, all bets in connection with the race had been declared "off." So that Matt Posterton, the rascally book-maker (who promptly decamped on finding himself under suspicion), did not reap the harvest he had expected.

While all this confirmed Sexton Blake in his opinion of Gulwood's infamy, it did not serve to bring any nearer the satisfactory solution of the Marble Arch double tragedy, nor suggest in any way the direction in which Gulwood or Mitchelmore were to be looked for.

Meanwhile, in connection with that double tragedy, poor Albert Moy, the taxi-driver, still lay in prison. Two or three times he had been brought before the magistrate, only to be remanded again and again on the application of the police, pending further evidence.

Remanded in custody, too, as might have been expected in so grave a charge! For, although Blake had by this time pretty well convinced Inspector Conover of the young cabman's innocence, it was beyond the Scotland Yard man's power as yet to get him released on bail.

Consequently, the state of poor Nellie Milton was grievous in the extreme. Like the true and trustful girl she was, she had never, even in the darkest hours, wavered in her belief in her lover's absolute innocence, and it caused her the acutest agony to think of the suffering he was compelled to endure.

It was Sexton Blake who, during this time of bitter trial, did more than anyone else to enable her to bear up. Time after time, when he saw her, and he saw her frequently and kept her acquainted as far as was advisable with the various developments, he assured her that all would be well in time.

"Have patience, Miss Nellie," he more than once bade her. "Francis Gulwood has disappeared, but once we can find him all will be well. Albert Moy will then be released, and you and he will be happy once again—happier than ever!"

So poor Nellie was a little comforted, and followed out her daily work as patiently as she could.

That work, as we know, was the selling of programmes and the dispensing of cups of coffee between the acts at the Merrimant Theatre.

Thither she repaired two or three times a week for matinees, and every night. Often in the intervals of her work would she dream of the happy days—(how long ago they seemed now!)—when Albert Moy was wont to meet her and escort her home. Dream, too, of the happy times in the future which (Mr. Blake had promised her) she and her sweetheart would have together.

On a certain night she had been indulging in these dreams rather more than usual, and had ended her visionary fancies with a deep sigh and the inwardly spoken words of intense longing:

"Oh, if only Francis Gulwood could be found, what a difference that would make!"

Just as this thought framed itself in her mind, the curtain went down on the first act, and the theatre, which previously had been all in darkness, was suddenly flooded with light.

Standing at the end of the dress-circle,

ready to start on her between-act work of supplying refreshment, Nellie suddenly became aware of somebody beckoning to her from one of the boxes on the O. P. side. The beckoner was a gentleman of middle age, wearing faultlessly-cut evening-dress and a carefully tended beard, trimmed to a point. He was one of a party of three, his companions being two ladies.

At once Nellie went round to the back of the box and opened the door.

"What can I get you, sir?"

"Please, bring three cups of coffee!"

The words were simple enough, and of a sort quite commonplace to the little waitress. What was it, then, that made her start?

The man's voice! Surely, she had heard those somewhat affected, ultra-silky tones before? But where?

It was but a little thing, after all, for it might well be that the man had been to the theatre before, and that she had heard the voice when receiving an order on some previous occasion.

Yet, somehow, she did not feel satisfied with this explanation, but found herself pondering the matter as she went away to execute the order. Why did she ponder so, and why was her heart fluttering so?

She did not know, could not understand. Neither could she fix the man whose voice had so strangely affected her.

As she returned to the box with the coffee, she strove to dismiss the matter from her mind. She handed the tray to the two ladies each in turn, then half-turned with the remaining cup to the gentleman in evening-dress.

His position made it easier for him to take it with his left hand, and he stretched it out. It was a well-formed hand, clad in a light dress-glove.

Nellie noted the hand and noted the glove. Noted also something else, namely, that as he took the cup, the middle stall of the glove crumpled up at the end, as if there was but half a finger inside!

At the same moment the man turned his face upward with a bold smile and a languorous "Thank you!"

In that instant Nellie caught the expression of his cunning eyes, and in a second all her doubts were settled! In a flash the identity of the man was revealed to her.

It was Francis Guilwood! That mellifluous voice had become familiar to her in the coroner's court when he had given evidence that had told so heavily against her sweetheart, Albert Moy!

Yes, she had fixed him now! The crumpled glove—indicative of a missing finger—had given her the clue! She knew him now for certain as Francis Guilwood, in spite of the disguising beard which he had grown since flying from justice!

How she controlled herself while giving him his change without betraying her agitation she never afterwards knew. The talk of his lady friends probably distracted him, otherwise he could not have failed to notice it.

But, once out of the box and alone, Nellie

gave free rein to her emotions! For a moment she stood with set, pale face, staring straight before her, and her nails digging into her clenched palms, as she wondered what she ought to do!

"He is a fugitive from justice, and he holds the key to my dear Albert's freedom!"

That was the thought that bore down every other and spurred her on to immediate action. In a moment she was hurrying through the lounge-bar to seek out the manageress of the refreshment department.

"Please, Mrs. Clayton, will you spare me for an hour—or half an hour? I want to go out—I must go out!"

"Bless the girl, whatever's the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost. What has happened? Where are you going?"

"Please, don't ask me now. You shall know all later. I must go now!"

And, without another word, she had darted away to get her hat and coat before dashing into the street.

Once there, she secured the first taxi she could see.

"Drive me to Baker Street as fast as you can," she said. "I'll tell you the house when we come to it!"

CHAPTER 24.

The Affray in the O. P. Box.

SEXTON BLAKE and Tinker had dined comfortably at half-past seven, and had then settled down to a quiet evening at home.

Quiet enough it was till a few minutes past nine. Then, all of a sudden, there came the pulling up of a taxicab outside, and a violent ringing of the bell.

"Hallo, somebody in a rare hurry!" Blake exclaimed, laying down his pipe. "See who it is, laddie!"

But before Tinker could leave the room Mrs. Bardell had gone to the street door, and the sound of a feminine voice came floating up the stairs. A few seconds later and the housekeeper appeared.

"It's Miss Milton, sir, and a rare state she's in!"

"Nellie Milton, at such a time, when she ought to be at the theatre! Something important must have happened! Ask her up at once, Mrs. Bardell!"

Nellie came in, and one glance at her pale, excited face told Blake that something unusual was afoot.

"This visit is unexpected, Miss Nellie," he said. "What has happened?"

"I've found Francis Guilwood, sir!"

"What? Do you really mean that? Where is he?"

"In a box at the Merriment Theatre!"

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite, sir. He's grown a beard since he fled away, but I've spoken to him, and there's no mistaking his voice. I've seen his left hand, too, and the top joint of the middle finger is missing! Oh, yes, I'm quite sure of him. He's at the theatre with two lady friends—a young one and an elderly one!"

"Good heavens! Tell me about it. Tell me exactly what has happened!"

Nellie told her story in a few hurried sentences. Blake's jaws snapped together as she finished. Then he turned to Tinker.

"Ring up Scotland Yard! Tell Inspector Conover what has happened, and ask him to meet me at the earliest possible moment outside the Merrimont Theatre!"

Tinker hurried away. In a minute or two he came back.

"Inspector Conover and a couple of his men are starting for the theatre at once!"

"Good! Then we'll start, too. Gulwood mustn't be allowed to slip through our fingers again. He must be arrested at once!"

Inspector Conover and his men were already outside the theatre when Blake, Tinker, and Nellie Milton alighted from their cab.

A few quick words of explanation, and they entered the vestibule, and made their way to the manager's office, to explain to him in turn what was afoot.

He was genuinely startled, and anxious to avoid anything like a sensational scene such as the arrest of a man in a private box would mean. All the same, in view of the gravity of the charge, he was eager enough to lend the police all the aid he could.

"The man has two ladies with him. I understand," said he. "You will not wish to cause them more distress than necessary? The curtain will be down on the second act in two minutes, so if, gentlemen, you will wait till then——"

"Certainly," interrupted Conover. "And directly the curtain is down perhaps you will kindly take a message that someone wants to see him. We will be at the back of the box, and can then arrest him without making any disturbance."

So it was arranged. In two minutes the curtain went down as the manager had said it would. He opened the door and addressed the man in the box.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but there is someone outside wishes to see you!"

"To see me!" exclaimed the bearded man, jumping to his feet. "I expect no one. There must be some mistake!"

"I believe not, sir," said the manager politely. "But you can soon settle that by stepping outside for a moment."

Gulwood was obviously perturbed. He seemed reluctant to step outside, but he did make an attempt to see outside.

And what he saw was enough, for it was the face of a man he knew and feared with a deadly fear!

"Sexton Blake!" he gasped, and went dead white.

"Yes, Francis Gulwood," returned Blake. "And here is Inspector Conover, of Scotland Yard. I advise you to come outside quietly, and so save a scene!"

"Curse you, that I won't!" retorted Gulwood, with a gleam of desperation in his eye. "Why do you come here at such a time? What do you want with me?"

"Do you want to know the charge against you?" asked Conover, stepping forward. "I wish to save these ladies a painful scene, if possible!"

"They won't thank you for that, blundered Gulwood. "I've done nothing. What is the charge against me?"

Conover bent forward and spoke in a quiet undertone.

"The charge against you is that of complicity in the double murder of Bernard Ullewick and Robert Dexter at the Marble Arch!"

Something like a howl of dismay broke from Gulwood, while his face started working with maniacal fury. The game was up, and he knew it! Nothing but a desperate step could possibly save him, and he took that step immediately.

Reckless of danger he turned, set a hand on the front of the box, and, vaulting over, jumped clean down into the stalls!

In his mad leap he landed feet foremost across one of several empty stalls, which had become vacated at the fall of the curtain. Had the seat been rigid, he might have escaped with no very serious injury. As it was, it was of the "tip-up" variety, which had not swung back quite properly on the rising of its late occupant.

As fate would have it, Gulwood's feet came down thump across its oblique surface, and banged it down to a momentary horizontal position. While this served in one sense to break his fall, it proved calamitous in the sequel.

For it threw him completely off his balance, and sent him, impelled by his own weight, ricocheting side-ways, and tilting him over! As a consequence, his head came into violent contact with the back of another seat in front, knocking him senseless and causing him to sprawl forward to the ground in an inert heap.

It had all taken place very suddenly, and in far less time than it takes to tell.

At the moment of Gulwood's leap the two ladies with whom he had been had given vent to screams of terror, while the younger one had reeled back and come near to fainting.

Leaving them for the time being to the care of Nellie Milton and two or three other women attendants who had come up, Blake and Inspector Conover hurried downstairs to the stalls.

Here all was a scene of great though suppressed excitement. The sight of a man deliberately making so perilous a leap had thrilled everybody with horror, and now the sight of him lying there so dead still and bleeding from the head, filled them all with a solemnity and awe that afforded a strange contrast to the atmosphere usually prevailing in a theatre given over to gaiety and merry laughter.

Already a doctor, who chanced to be among the audience, was bending over the unconscious man, and was busily engaged in examining his heart and the wound upon his head.

As he finished Blake moved up to him,

"How is he, doctor?"

"In a bad way—a very bad way! We had better get him along to the hospital at once!"

"Will he recover?"

The doctor looked grave, and gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"It is impossible to say yet," he answered. He may live, or he may—die! It is just a toss up!"

CHAPTER 25.

Tightening the Net.

WITH the news travelling fast, other police-officers had hurried into the theatre from the street. Instructing these to see to the conveyance of the unconscious Gulwood to the hospital, Inspector Conover and Blake hastened upstairs again.

Here, in a small room adjoining the lounge, they found Gulwood's two lady friends in charge of Nellie and other theatre attendants. By this time the younger lady had recovered from her faintness, and was able to pay attention to the subsequent proceedings. It appeared that her name was Miss Bayne, and that the elder lady was her mother. It was the latter who spoke first now, after she had listened to Inspector Conover's report of Gulwood's condition.

"Terrible—terrible!" she murmured. "Terrible, indeed, for my daughter here, who is engaged to marry him!"

Blake glanced at the girl. She was very pretty, very little more than twenty, and of a timid and shrinking type. He was sorry for her temporary distress, but inwardly glad that all this had come about before she had become the wife of such a man as Gulwood.

"It is all very distressing," he said. "But it was the man's own fault. He deliberately leapt out of the box!"

"But you goaded him to it by making that vile charge against him!" protested Mrs. Bayne indignantly. "It was monstrous! How could you make such an infamous charge against so highly respectable a woman as Mr. Finchley Hardwick?"

"Finchley Hardwick!" echoed Blake. "Is that the name you know him by?"

"Certainly!"

"Then I had better inform you, madam, that that name is false. His right name is Francis Gulwood!"

"I noticed you called him that before. It is all a hideous mistake!"

"Not on our part, madam. His real name is Francis Gulwood, and he is wanted on the charge of complicity in a double murder!" said Inspector Conover.

"It cannot be!" cried Mrs. Bayne, while the girl, with an awful shudder, covered her white face with her hands. "Let me take you to where he lives. His servants will prove who he is!"

"Where does he live, madam?" asked Blake.

"At South Kensington—Harrogate Gardens!"

"Then we will come with you at once," returned Blake, for this was precisely what he wanted—to visit Gulwood's abode, and search for further proofs of his connection with the crimes with which he was charged.

The party went to Harrogate Gardens in two cabs. Arrived there, the servants were interviewed, one and all declaring their master's name to be Mr. Finchley Hardwick. In this they were quite sincere, never having known him by any other name than that.

"There, you see!" exclaimed Mrs. Bayne. "You have made a very serious mistake. You came after the wrong man!"

"One moment, madam, please!" begged Blake. "I have a few questions to ask these good people!"

And then, with a few deft questions, he elicited the fact that all the servants were newly engaged. None had been in Gulwood's service for many weeks, and they knew nothing whatever about his past career.

Still Mrs. Bayne persisted, and still her daughter kept her eyes averted and wept in silence every now and then. Pitying the girl, Blake suddenly turned to her and said, in an undertone:

"Don't grieve too much, Miss Bayne. It is a terrible blow to you, but later on you will come to see that it was all for the best, and that you have had a merciful escape!"

"I feel that already," was the young lady's rather surprising reply. "I feel you are right about this man. There was always something about him I could not understand, and I never trusted him."

"Yet you promised to marry him?"

"Only because my mother pressed me to do so. I never loved him—Heaven forgive me, I hated him! But he was a rich man—a millionaire, we understood, and my mother urged me on and on—"

She did not finish her sentence, but broke down to weep again. Blake nodded, and asked her no more. He had heard enough to understand everything. It was the old, old story—the old, old tragedy—of a too submissive daughter ready to sacrifice herself at the urging of a parent covetous of presumed great wealth.

"Wait but a little while," the detective said soothingly, "and we shall be able to prove that Gulwood is not a millionaire, but an unscrupulous adventurer, and that you have had a merciful escape. So dry your tears and think of the coming time when you will again be happy with the man you really love!"

She looked up quickly, a faint blush rising to her pale cheeks.

"How do you know about that?" she asked. "Do you know Harry Melrose? Or has my mother told you of him?"

"No, my dear young lady," replied Blake, with a wise smile. "Only it seemed to me impossible that a girl like you should not love somebody. Now I know. Your tears were not so much for Gulwood as for Harry Melrose!"

He was right, as events afterwards proved.

But he did not pursue the delicate subject then. He turned to Inspector Conover.

"I think this is a case where we may justly take the law in our own hands and search the premises without a warrant, eh?"

"Just what I was thinking," returned the Scotland Yard man. "If you're ready, we'll make a start!"

It was a fair-sized house, with a good many rooms, and a thorough search of all of them promised to take a considerable time.

Blake, however, wisely began with an apartment set aside as a smoking-room and private "den" for Gulwood. Among other things, this contained a roll-top desk, and it was to this that Blake gave his first attention.

His instinct proved to be right, as usual. After picking the lock and rolling back the top, the customary row of pigeon-holes stood revealed.

These were all filled with various papers which Blake and Conover at once eagerly inspected. They related to various gambling transactions in which Gulwood was involved, and comprised a certain amount of private correspondence worth analysis later, but throwing no immediate light on the subject they were keenest on. In fact, they had gone through all the pigeon-holes and all the contents of the drawers at the side, without coming on anything at all connected with the Ullswick-Dexter affair.

"No go so far," murmured Conover in a somewhat disappointed tone. "If he has any papers connected with the problem we're engaged on, we shall have to search for them elsewhere."

Blake did not answer him. He had risen, and had walked to the side of the desk which he seemed to be measuring with his eye.

"What's up, Mr. Blake? What are you looking at?" Conover inquired.

"At the depth of this desk. From the front of these pigeon-holes to the back of the desk is pretty well eighteen inches. Now these two centre drawers are barely more than nine inches deep. That seems to me a dreadful waste of space in a piece of furniture specially made to economise room."

"Yes it does, but—"

"They used to make secret compartments in the old bureaux before the invention of safes." Blake mused.

"But you don't think there's anything of that sort here?"

"Well, it's just what I do think!" answered Blake, and, leaning forward over the desk, he again pulled out the two shallow drawers.

Nothing save a blank wooden end revealed itself to the sight. But something else did reveal itself to the touch!

At the pressure of Blake's fingers there came a clicking sound. Still nothing was visible, and Blake stared forward for the moment mystified. But the next he was

pulling out the drawer next to the blank space.

"Ha!" he exclaimed at sight of a small steel projection. "Here we are!"

He thrust his hand into the space and pressed the projection. Instantly what had appeared to be a blank wooden end, showed itself to be an inner secret drawer!

He pulled it out. It contained a bundle of papers tied up with tape. Untying the bundle, he looked at the documents. Instantly his eyes lighted up.

"Our search is rewarded at last!" he exclaimed.

"What are those papers?" asked Conover, peering forward.

"What we have been wishing for! They are letters. Some of them are from Bernard Ullswick to Robert Dexter, and some are from Dexter to Ullswick!"

"Gee! That's a discovery! But, look! There's another packet at the back of the drawer!"

"Get bold of them! We must examine them at once!"

CHAPTER 26.

What the Papers Revealed.

THEY went back to Blake's chambers. There they at once set about an examination of the documents they had found.

Half an hour's close study of them was sufficient to show that they were of the utmost value. For in the correspondence that had passed between Bernard Ullswick and Robert Dexter, added to a sort of rough diary which the latter had kept, the full story of the silver mine was disclosed.

According to the diary referred to, Dexter had some time before lived in Peru and been in partnership with a man named Rennie. Believing that many rich mines remained to be discovered, these two had set out from Puno to the mountains prospecting.

For a long time they had explored and examined in vain, but after many hardships they had at last struck a rich vein of surface silver which promised infinitely greater things if only they could obtain the necessary help and appliances for boring purposes.

This needed capital, which the two prospectors did not possess, and they decided they must return to Puno in order to raise the necessary money. Before doing this, however, they made careful, though rough drawings of the mine and a map of the way thither. This was absolutely necessary because of the remoteness of the mine amid the mountains, and the difficulty they knew they would experience if they attempted to find their way there again without some such guide.

For safety's sake it was agreed between the partners that each should keep half of the plans so that neither should be able to begin operations without the consent of the other. With the plans safely in their pockets, they made their way back to the town of Puno. There, after casting about, they were

introduced to a saloon-keeper, reputed to be a man of considerable wealth and one likely to advance the few thousands they required for the purchase of mining machinery and plant.

This man, whose name was Peter Swart, expressed his readiness to go in with them on sharing terms, and negotiations were begun.

It soon became evident, however, that Peter Swart was an over-covetous man, and that he was by no means satisfied with the share he was to have in the mine. He wanted the lot, or practically so, and in his unreasoning greed resolved to have it.

As keeper of a low-class drinking saloon he was in close touch with many of the roughest desperadoes—mostly Spanish half-castes—it would have been possible to find in that part

of the country. In collusion with a gang of these, he arranged one night for an attack on Rennie and Dexter, in order to get hold of the maps and plans they were known to carry about with them.

This attack duly came off as the two prospectors were on their way, late one night, from Swart's drinking den to their own lodgings on the outskirts of the town.

At the loneliest point of their walk the gang fell upon them.

All Robert Dexter knew of it was that he received a heavy blow on the head which knocked all the senses out of him. When he came to, it was to find himself lying beside the road. All was dark and silent—nobody was about—the gang had disappeared!

But on groping about, Dexter suddenly came upon a still form lying on the ground! To his unspeakable horror he found it to be poor Rennie!

He was quite dead, his pockets were turned inside out; the mining plans which Dexter knew he had had upon him—gone!

Examining his own pockets Dexter saw that they had been rifled, too. Not until later on did he recall the fact that he had not come out with his half of the plans, but that he had left them at home at his lodgings.

Making at once for the sheriff's house, he gave information regarding the attack. The body of Rennie was taken care of, and in due course decently buried, while the hue and cry went out after the gang who had murdered him.

But they had worked so secretly as to leave no clue behind them, and as it was not till afterwards that Swart's connection with the murder became known, Dexter could give no information. The result was that for the time being the gang escaped detection.

Dexter recovered his own half of the plans from the place where he had concealed them at his lodgings, and the only consolation he had was that the gang would be helpless to work the mine—or even discover its exact location without them.

He himself, with his previous knowledge of the ground, might have found his way to the mine again, and indeed he made one attempt to do so. But on entering the mountains a few miles from where the mine was, he found himself attacked again—by presumably the same gang, who were out searching—and only with difficulty escaped with his life and his precious plans!

He was already weakened in body and nerve by the blow he had received upon the head, and this second attack altogether settled him.

Broken in body and spirit, he gave up all idea of working the mine, and resolved to quit Peru and come back to England. Perhaps there lingered at the back of his head a hope that at some future time he might be able to return and resume operations, but for the present he abandoned any such intention.

Arrived in London, he first stayed at a comfortable hotel, living on the couple of hundred pounds or so he had saved.

But in these ludicrously expensive days two hundred pounds does not go far in

London. Dexter's money came to an end, and so did his residence at the hotel. Long before this he had tried to obtain employment, and with his money gone he redoubled his efforts. But in days when work should be plentiful, he could find none. He was a man broken in health and spirit, and nobody would take him on.

From that moment his decline was swift. He became a hawker of matches and newspapers in the streets, and a denizen of doss-houses—when he had money was forthcoming—and a sleeper in the parks or on the Embankment when it was not.

So several months passed. Then, when things were at their worst and it seemed as if Robert Dexter must inevitably follow the weary road that ends in a pauper's grave.

THE MYSTERY OF THE X04.



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something happened. A ray of hope came once more into his life!

It had long been his habit to frequent various public libraries and news-rooms, mainly for the warmth and shelter such places afforded. Examining the "Times" one day, he suddenly came on an advertisement that was plainly addressed to himself!

It originated from a man named Bernard Ullawick, a resident in Buenos Ayres. He did not know Ullawick, had never heard of him, but from certain hints conveyed in the advertisement, it was plain that Ullawick knew about him and of his former partnership with Rennie. The notice asked that if it should happen to meet the eye of Robert Dexter, formerly of Puno, would he reply to a certain question through the columns of the same paper.

With difficulty Dexter raised the few shillings necessary to advertise his reply to the question asked. This was to the effect that he still had in his possession his half of the mining plans.

In due time came another advertisement from Ullawick—this was probably the one that Sexton Blake had traced—asking Dexter either to forward the plans or to communicate with Ullawick at the address given.

Dexter had followed the latter course, and several letters had passed between them as a result. These letters—part of the documents found in Gulwood's house—showed how Ullawick and Dexter had arranged to meet in London with a view to combining Dexter's half of the plans with the half which somehow or other had fallen into Ullawick's hands, the intention being then to go on with the mining operations, for which Ullawick would raise the necessary capital. They had fixed on Marble Arch as a meeting place, and in order that they should recognise each other, they had agreed to wear a distinctive badge in the shape of a yellow flower or ribbon!

How that meeting just failed to come off, and the two men came to their tragic ends, is already known to the reader.

"Astonishing!" exclaimed Inspector Conover when they had completed their examination of the papers. "Astonishing how right you have been all through, Mr. Blake, even to the wearing of that yellow rose and ribbon. The whole thing seems to have been as plain in your mind before, as it is now that we have had the advantage of going through these papers!"

"Up to a point—yes," replied Blake. "But even now there are one or two points that remain dark and obscure."

"What do you mean? It's pretty plain from those finger-prints on the silk hat that Gulwood killed Ullawick?"

"Yes, that's so, but who killed Dexter? Gulwood must have had an equally culpable villain working with him."

"That's true. We shall have to try and find him out."

"We shall also have to try and find out how Bernard Ullawick came into possession of his half of the plans, and also how Mitchelmore came into the business! Hullo, there's the telephone-bell! Answer it, Tinker."

Tinker departed and came back in a minute.

"It's from the hospital, sir. Francis Gulwood is still very bad, but he's recovered consciousness and is asking to see you!"

"Go whiz!" cried Blake. "That suggests a confession! Come on, inspector. It looks as if at last we are going to clear up the dark points!"

Blake was right, as they learnt on arriving at the hospital.

CHAPTER 27.

Confession!

A DOCTOR met them at the end of the ward in a far, screened-off corner of which Francis Gulwood lay.

"How is the patient, doctor?" Blake asked.

"Very ill! Really sick unto death, as the old phrase has it. There is no hope of his recovering, no hope at all. But, as sometimes a dying man will, he has rallied. He has recovered consciousness and has asked for you several times. He seems to have something on his mind which he wants to tell you about."

"Ah, he's going to confess as you said, Mr. Blake!" whispered Conover, as they tiptoed along the ward to that screened-off corner.

There on the white bed Francis Gulwood lay. His face, once so ruddy and suggestive of perfect health and strength, matched now for hue the snowy sheets which covered him, while his wounded head was swathed in linen bandages.

He was very weak, but he moved his head as Blake and Conover approached, and it was plain from the change of light in his weary eyes that he instantly recognised them.

"You have come, Mr. Blake," he murmured faintly and speaking very jerkily. "I am glad! I'm done! I can't live much longer. But before I go I—I want to tell you something!"

Blake nodded his head as he sat down beside the bed. He knew this man for what he was—an arch-villain, a murderer, but he pitied him. In the presence of death he thrust away our hatreds and our enmities, and all being frail, suspend our judgments of other men's frailties. So that now that Francis Gulwood was brought low, he pitied him.

"What is it you wish to tell me?" he asked gently.

"About the murder—that double murder with which you charged me! You were right in charging me. I am guilty. I killed one of those men!"

"Bernard Ullawick?" suggested Blake.

"Yes, though how you know which puzzles me."

"We found your finger-prints on the brim of his silk hat. You picked it up after it had fallen off."

"Quite right. You find out everything. I'll tell you how it happened."

And then, though his voice faltered from weakness, he explained quite clearly how, as

the cab drew up and Bernard Ullswick alighted, he had blundered into him on purpose with his umbrella, and knocked his hat off, and how on restoring it and replacing it on his head, he had plunged the tiny hypodermic syringe—charged with poison—into the back of his head!

Blake paused a moment after this terrible confession; then he asked:

"And who killed the other man—Robert Dexter?"

Gulwood's lips moved once or twice to form words without uttering them. Not until Sexton Blake had repeated his question did he answer it.

"Dexter was killed by Bryden Mitchelmore!"

Blake started. He had always judged Mitchelmore to be closely connected with the grim plot, but he had never supposed he had taken so ghastly a part in its execution.

"How did Mitchelmore kill him?"

"In the same way—with another poisoned syringe! With such a crowd about it wasn't difficult to touch the back of his neck without being noticed. Mitchelmore and I were both disguised, of course!"

"That story you told me of the Spaniard being in the cab was not true?" put in Conover.

"All false—all false!"

"Then Albert Moy had nothing to do with it all?"

"Nothing at all. I faked that story to shield ourselves."

Blake took up the questioning again.

"How came you to know of Ullswick and Dexter's movements? How came you to know that they were going to meet at Marble Arch? I know you got possession of their letters, but I presume that was not until the time of their death, when you took the plans also."

"That's quite true. It was easy to take the papers amid so much confusion. I went through Ullswick's pockets while pretending to be loosening his clothes, and was easily able to transfer the papers to a confederate, and Mitchelmore did the same with Dexter. But we had already seen the letters before; and so got to know of their arrangements!"

And then in reply to Blake's further questions, he explained how for several months past, Dexter and Ullswick had both been shadowed by accomplices of theirs—the former at various doss-houses in London, the latter in Buenos Ayres, on the ship in which he had crossed the Atlantic, and afterwards at his hotel in Liverpool. These accomplices had intercepted the letters, steamed them open, and taken copies of them which had been transmitted to Gulwood. It had required considerable ingenuity and more audacity, but the men employed were accomplished rogues, who were used to such work.

So, by what Gulwood had confessed, was the curtain lifted to reveal the truth, but one or two things still remained obscure.

"How came Bernard Ullswick to obtain possession of half the plans?" Blake asked. "Was he in any way connected with the gang who killed Ronnie?"

"No, no. He was quite innocent of any crime. He received the plans from another man as a dying bequest, and as a token of gratitude for some good turn Ullswick had done in his lifetime. Whether this man was connected with the gang I cannot say, but it was he who told Ullswick that the other half of the plans were in the possession of a man named Robert Dexter, supposed to be in England."

"How did you discover all this? How did you first learn that Ullswick was moving in the matter?"

"It was Mitchelmore who got to know about that. In this way. Eager to develop the mine, Ullswick tried to find Dexter. For this purpose he consulted a South American lawyer named Roper. Roper in his time had done all sorts of shady things, though Ullswick didn't discover that till afterwards, when he at once threw him over and got advice elsewhere. But then it was too late. Because Roper was a relative of Bryden Mitchelmore and hand in glove with him."

"Then it was Lawyer Roper who told Mitchelmore about the plans?"

"Yes. He suggested that Mitchelmore should watch Ullswick and Dexter and get hold of the mining plans. In his turn, Mitchelmore confided in me, and the three of us determined to possess ourselves of all the plans and then float the mine and cut up the profits between us."

"But why did you wait to get both men together?" interposed Inspector Conover. "Surely during the time you were shadowing them you could have robbed them separately."

"We thought of doing that at first, but abandoned the idea. We decided that if we robbed one man the other would hear of it before we could rob him, and so he put on his guard. That would have defeated our purpose."

"Just as you said, Mr. Blake," remarked Conover; then, addressing the dying man again: "And why was it necessary to kill them?"

"Because had we left them alive we should never have dared work the mine. They would have given the alarm, and the authorities out in Peru would have been on the look-out for us directly we began working. It was murder or nothing, and we decided on murder!"

Sexton Blake nodded gravely. It was all as his wonderful powers of reasoning had told him it must be.

"One more question," he said. "Mitchelmore is a guilty man, and must be made to suffer for his guilt. Where is he?"

Gulwood's face changed.

"There was a time when I wouldn't have told you that," he answered faintly. "But just before his flight Mitchelmore treated me badly, so I don't see why I should shield him any more. The last I heard about him was that he was in Birmingham. He's got a bit of an office there, under another name."

"And the address?" asked Blake quickly, for he could see that Gulwood was failing fast after his forced rally of strength.

"Twenty-six, Sheldon Street. Metal company he runs under name of—"

"Yes—yes!" urged Blake, for Gulwood had stopped for breath.

"Yelford—Stephen Yelford!" came very faintly from Gulwood's lips.

And that was all he said—all he ever said! Quite still he lay, with rigid body and closed eyes, and never again by his mortal tongue did he utter a word!

At a gesture from Sexton Blake, the doctor came forward. He bent over the motionless man. A minute's examination was enough.

"It's all over," he said simply. "He is dead!"

CHAPTER 28.

The Passing of Bryden Mitchelmore.

CORPORATION Street, Birmingham, was at its busiest the next morning, when Sexton Blake and Detective-Inspector Conover walked down towards Sheldon Street, which lay off it.

They had arrived in the Midland city overnight, but too late to find anyone at the offices of the "Yelford and Company."

Now, in the morning, they were on their way to find Bryden Mitchelmore, alias Stephen Yelford.

Reaching Sheldon Street they found number twenty-six, and read an inscription on the doorpost to the effect that Yelford and Company did business on the first floor.

To the first floor they went, and passed through the swing door to the outer office. A weak-eyed youth, who acted as sole clerk, came forward to ask them their business.

"We wish to see Mr. Stephen Yelford. Is he in?" asked Blake.

"Yes, he's in; but I don't know whether he's engaged," returned the youth cautiously. "I'll see, if you like. Who shall I say wants to see him?"

"Never mind about names. He'll know us when he sees us. Tell him we've called on most important business," said Conover, rather to Blake's regret, who would have managed the affair in a different way.

But it was done now. The words were spoken, and the youth made for the inner door.

As he opened it Blake caught a glimpse of a haggard-faced man, seated at a desk, with his head resting wearily in his hands. It was only a glimpse, but it was sufficient. In spite of some laboured attempts at disguise, the man stood revealed as Bryden Mitchelmore!

At the clerk's announcement, he jumped to his feet, and made as if to come into the outer office. But, instead of doing this, he caught the young clerk by the shoulders, bundled him out, and then slammed the door to, locking himself in.

Blake heard the turn of the key.

"He's recognised us!" he whispered. "And I'm a bit afraid of what he'll do!"

"What do you mean? What's there to be afraid of? We're two to one, and can get plenty more help, if necessary."

"I'm not afraid for myself," returned Blake. "I'm afraid for his own sake. That look in his eyes was unmistakable. It means suicide if he gets the chance!"

Blake's reading of his face was absolutely correct. Hardly were the words out of his mouth than something happened.

A revolver shot rang out from the inner room, followed by a heavy fall and one dying groan!

"Too late!" gasped Conover. "But we must force the door. We may save him yet!"

Blake turned to the frightened clerk.

"Go for the police and a doctor at once!" he ordered him, and the youth departed.

By the time he returned with a doctor and two or three police-officers, they found that Blake and Conover had just succeeded in forcing the inner door off its hinges.

A few rapid words of explanation, and the whole party went into the inner room. There upon the floor lay Bryden Mitchelmore in a huddled heap.

Even without the doctor it would have been easy to tell that there was no hope.

The financier was dead—shot through the brain by his own hand!

When, a little later on, his papers came to be examined, full proof was forthcoming of his guilt. Without any shadow of doubt, it was he who had engineered the whole plot, and it was his own hand that had struck Robert Dexter down.

As to his hooks at his London office, they were found to be in a hopeless tangle. Instead of being rich, as he was reputed to be, he was deeply insolvent, and it soon became plain that he had been tempted to engage in the murderous plot in order to get possession of the rich mine, and so save himself from ruin!

CHAPTER 29.

Conclusion.

ENOUGH of tragedy and sorrow. Let us, by way of completing our tale, turn to a happier theme.

Albert Moy was at once released from prison, and great was the joy of his meeting with Nellie Milton once again. Which of the two was the happier it would be impossible to say, as it would be to decide which was the more deeply grateful to Sexton Blake. Both recognised fully that it was entirely due to the great detective's efforts that, after much tribulation, all had ended well.

Efforts were made, by an application to the Treasury, to obtain compensation to the young cab-driver, but these met with no success. The Government department expressed its deep sympathy with Albert Moy for the inconvenience and suffering he had been caused, but regretted, etc., etc.

Nevertheless, the young chauffeur was to be recompensed in another and quite unexpected way, and this, in a measure, was due to Sexton Blake also.

For, having finally accounted for the two chief criminals, and having brought about the arrest of Hoper and some of their other accomplices, who had played minor parts—these were, in due course, brought to trial and fittingly punished—Blake turned his attention to the subject of the silver mine.

Mainly through him it was established that the plans and the claim to the mine had rightly belonged to Robert Dexter and his former partner, Rennie. Both these being dead, the mining rights had descended to their next of kin. Setting himself to trace these, Blake in quite a little time succeeded.

A brother of Rennie's was found to be working in a coal mine in Scotland, while some cousins of Dexter's were discovered at a little place not far from Nuneaton. These latter—they included husband and wife and a family of children—had been badly hit by the war, and were living on the borderland of poverty.

Their joy on learning that they had become possessed of a half share in a rich silver mine may be imagined. But, of course, they had no money for preliminary expenses in working the mine; nor had Rennie, the collier; nor were any of them much disposed to leave Great Britain and go to far Peru.

So, on Sexton Blake's suggestion, the rights were sold to a wealthy London syndicate, with the result that Rennie, the collier, and the Dexter family soon found themselves possessed of ample fortunes.

Their gratitude to Sexton Blake was overflowing, and, by agreement, the joint heirs presently offered him a cheque for five thousand pounds, as a token of it.

The detective was touched by the offer, but declined to accept it.

"I have ample money for my modest needs," he told them, with a smile.

"But we sha'n't be happy unless you

allow us to show our thanks in some way," they answered.

Whereat Blake made a suggestion. He reminded them of the sufferings which Albert Moy had been compelled to undergo, told them of the young chauffeur's secret ambition to quit cab-driving and go in for dairy farming in the country, and hinted that perhaps they might like to set him up in business.

They jumped at the idea eagerly for they were good, honest folk, who felt they wouldn't be able thoroughly to enjoy their great good fortune unless somebody else shared in it.

And so it came about that, instead of Blake getting that five thousand pounds, Mr. and Mrs. Moy—for they were happily married by this time—got it.

In these days Albert drives a cab no more. He and his pretty young wife have migrated to Dorsetshire, where they have a poultry and dairy farm.

They are doing well, husband and wife, who were both country bred, working together with a will.

In case Sexton Blake should ever think they had forgotten him, they take care to remind him of their gratitude once a week. For every Saturday there arrives at the chambers in Baker Street a sweet-smelling hamper.

It always contains a week's supply of new-laid eggs and a couple of pounds of beautiful fresh butter, made by Nellie's own expert hands.

A humble present? Well, maybe so. But with new-laid eggs at umpteen shillings a dozen, and with so much of that mysterious composition called margarine about, it is one that Sexton Blake and Tinker keenly appreciate.

THE END.



The Footman From France.

A Short and Amusing Tale from the leaves of Sexton Blake's Notebook.

CHAPTER 1.

A Meeting In France—Sexton Blake's Plan—The New Footman.

"GOOD-MORNING, Lord Valincourt! I hope you have not entirely forgotten me."

"Good-morning, sir. Your face is very familiar, but upon my word I can't— Ah, I have it! You are Mr. Sexton Blake, of course. How stupid of me! Eh, what?"

It was a sunny day at the end of August, and the two speakers had met after lunch outside the Hotel de Bains, in the ancient Normandy town of St. Malo; the English detective alert and sunburned, in baggy tweeds and thick boots; and the old English nobleman, white-haired, languid, and patrician, dressed in the latest modes.

"Enjoying a holiday, Mr. Blake—eh, what?" inquired Lord Valincourt, of Eaton Square, London and Vale Towers, Cheshire.

"A short one," replied Sexton Blake. "I have been on a walking tour through a part of Normandy. I arrived at St. Malo last evening, and I am crossing the Channel to-night. Have you been in France long, sir?"

"Nearly a month—since the close of the season," said the old nobleman. "I am very fond of St. Malo, and so is my wife."

"But you have paid a visit to London in the meantime?"

"No; not at all."

"But I saw you in town recently."

"Impossible, Mr. Blake!"

"Then I don't know what it means!" the detective exclaimed in astonishment.

"About ten days ago, in the middle of

August, I saw your brougham, with your coachman on the box, driving rapidly through Hyde Park, near the Albert Gate. It was a wet, misty morning, and I could not see very distinctly, but there were two persons in the vehicle and I naturally took them to be Lady Valincourt and yourself."

"Neither of us were there. We have not been out of France for a month, nor have I given anybody the use of my brougham. You have made a mistake, Mr. Blake."

"Not so far as the brougham and coachman are concerned, I'll swear. Is your town residence in Eaton Square shut up, sir?"

"No; the servants have been left in charge, as usual," replied Lord Valincourt. "Which reminds me, by the by, that my second footman has left, and that I intended to fill his place with a Frenchman. It is a whim of Lady Valincourt's, and I must see to it without delay. But to return to this extraordinary affair. It puzzles me, Mr. Blake, and it alarms me. I—I am not exactly superstitious, but after being told that I was seen in London, at a time when I was two or three hundred miles away—"

"There is no occasion to be alarmed" broke in Sexton Blake. And in a few words, with a smiling face, he explained to the old nobleman what he believed to be the solution of the mystery.

"The thing is preposterous!" cried Lord Valincourt, turning red with anger. "If you are right, if those scoundrels have dared to—but I can't believe it! My servants are trustworthy, sir!"

"Yet the best of servants are liable to yield to such an alluring temptation, sir. And there would be little or no risk, since all your friends are out of town during August."

"By gad, I will return at once! Eh, what?"

"No, don't do that," said Sexton Blake. "Leave the matter to me. Write to your butler in time for this evening's cross-Channel post, telling him that you have engaged a French underfootman, and that the man will arrive to-morrow. Do you understand?"

"I think I do!" exclaimed Lord Valincourt, with a chuckle. "Ha, ha! I see the point! Eh, what? But I won't be satisfied without absolute proof, Mr. Blake."

"You shall have it," declared the detective. "You shall see for yourself, I promise you."

That night Sexton Blake crossed from St. Malo to Southampton, and at eleven o'clock on the following morning there arrived in a cab, at Lord Valincourt's residence in Eaton Square, a slim, foreign-looking man, who had a small trunk with him. Mr. Pinch, the portly and dignified butler, opened the door.

"Behold, I am Jules Panteleon," said the stranger, "and you must be Monsieur Pinch, ze butler of ze English milord! Is it not that you have received a letter from his lordship, and that you do expect me?"

"Yes, I've been expecting you," replied the butler. "Come in, Mounseer Pantaloon, or whatever your name is. A piece of check, I call it," he added to himself, "for 'is lordship to introduce a beastly furriner into 'is 'ousehold. This means an end of our 'igh jinks, I'm afraid."

Jules Panteleon was assigned to a small room, which he was to share with the first footman, and at lunch, which was laid in the area sitting-room, he was introduced to his fellow-servants—to Mrs. Meeson the cook, Bilker the coach-

man, Gilson the first footman, Cooney and Jorrocks, the parlour-maid and scullery-maid, and to Chubb, the boy in buttons. But there was a coolness in their reception; a chilling aloofness, which told the new footman that he was not welcome. He resolved to change that, however, and his chance came the same evening, when, on entering the dining-room, he surprised the butler in the act of mixing a brandy-and-soda.

"What the deuce do you want 'ere?" asked the butler, with a scowl.

"Pardon," said Jules; "but it is zat I have a thirst, and I hear ze clink of ze bottle."

"Well, you have a cheek!" gasped the butler.

"What is zat?"

"Impudence. I mean!"

Jules smiled and sat down, and Mr. Pinch, who had been at the brandy before, made the best of the situation. The two had one drink together, and then another. They talked, and clinked glasses, while the butler's countenance turned from red to scarlet.

"It is to me a pleasure to know you," Jules said presently; "and to be a servant of ze great English milord. He must truly be rich to have a house of such fineness. Of work there must be plenty at times, but when ze milord is away, what zen? Is it zat you lead ze quiet life, ze life of dulness, or do you enjoy yourselves?"

"What do you mean?" demanded the butler, glancing keenly at the new footman with his fishy eyes. "The quiet life—eh? What are you driving at, Mounseer Pantaloon?"

"I will myself make clear," said Jules. "In my native France, when I was in ze service of ze Marquis Lambelle, in Paris, I and ze other servants do as we like when ze marquis go to Trouville with his family. Pouf! And why not? There is nobody to tell. So we eat and drink of ze best and make merry, and drive in ze Bois in the carriages of ze marquis. But here, in

London, it seem zat you do not do ze same."

"Oh, don't we?" exclaimed Mr. Pinch, with a smile of joy. "Suppose I was to tell you that we did? Would you keep mum?"

"Keep mum?" repeated Jules. "What is zat? Ah, you mean ze wine of Mumm—the champagne zat fizzes in the glasses!"

"I mean, can you keep your mouth shut?"

"Oui, oui, like an oyster, is it not? Now I understand, Monsieur Pinch! It is zat you do in London as we do in France!"

"You bet we do!" cried the butler, flinging discretion to the winds. "You're a good sort, Panty, my boy, and we can trust you. We've been 'aving 'igh jinks 'ere, let me tell you, while the master is abroad. In gay Paree you drive in the Boy, do you? Well, 'oro we drive in 'Ide Park, as the swells do in the season. Every morning nearly me and the cook, as big as life, take our airing in one of 'is lordship's carriages, and you wouldn't know us from the master and mistress, because we rig ourselves out from their wardrobes."

"Even so it is in Paris, where I put on ze clothes of ze marquis!" exclaimed Jules. "Ha, ha, what sport!"

"You shall share ours," vowed Mr. Pinch. "We've been a bit shy of you, naturally, but now I know that you're all right, I shall pass the word around, and the 'igh jinks will begin again, Mounseer Pantaloon."

The glasses were refilled, and the two winked at each other.

"I drink to ze high jeenks, Monsieur Pinch," said Jules.

"'Ere's luck, Panty, my boy!" said the butler. "Vive ler Ontong Cordule!"

It was thus that Jules Panteleon broke the ice, and during the next day, and the next—his fellow-servants were no longer mistrustful of him—he saw and

learned much, having the run of the house, eating and drinking of the best, and once going for a ride in the Park with the butler. After breakfast on the morning of the third day of the festivities, when he had decided that it was time to put a stop to the game, something occurred to alter his plans. Mr. Pinch and Mrs. Meeson came downstairs in fashionable and gorgeous raiment, which they had borrowed from the wardrobes of their master and mistress.

"I have a bit of news to tell you, Jules," said the butler, "before me and the cook start for our drive. We've been talking the matter over, and we've concluded to make you known to some of our friends in the neighbourhood, whose families are also out of town. So we're going to give a little supper to-morrow night, at which you will be introduced to some ladies and gentlemen from the 'ouseholds of the Duke of Loamshire and Sir Lazarus Cohen."

"And very pleasant company Mr. Pantaloon will find them," put in the cook.

"Is it zat I could doubt zat?" Jules replied gallantly, placing his hand on his heart. "I am devastated by ze honour! Truly you do zings more well as we do in France. I zank you both."

"That's all right," said Mr. Pinch. "We just make 'ay while the sun shines, my boy, for in another fortnight 'is lordship returns, and then 'e will take us all down to 'is country seat. My arm, Mrs. Meeson," he added pompously. "The carriage waits."

"Ain't he a swell, Jules?" chuckled the delighted cook. "He ought to have a peerage, and no mistake."

The impudent pair departed for their drive, and shortly afterwards Jules, who was looking forward with keen satisfaction to the supper-party on the morrow, left the house, and walked to the nearest post-office, where he despatched a cablegram to Lord Valincourt at St. Malo.

CHAPTER 2.

The Supper Party—Chubb Makes Trouble—The Detective's Surprise.

BEHIND the closed shutters of his lordship's big house in Eaton Square, there was a scene of feasting and revelry, under circumstances that were not uncommon in London at that season of the year.

Jules had been introduced to the "ladies and gentlemen" from the neighbouring houses, and the party had sat down to supper. All were in high spirits, with the exception of Chubb, the boy in buttons, who had been forced to wait at table, much to his disgust.

The supper was a cold one, as a matter of convenience, but it lacked nothing that the house afforded or that could be charged to Lord Valincourt's account. Champagne was cooling in ice-pails, and the long table in the dining-room, spread with his lordship's linen, cut-glass, and silver-plate, fairly groaned with good things—with *pate-de-foi-gras* sandwiches, rich pasty, cold joints and fowls, grouse-pies, salads, and trifle. The men were in evening-dress, and the fair sex displayed silks and satins and jewels.

"Selfish old curmudgeons; that's wot they are!" Chubb told himself wrathfully. "Wouldn't I like to spoil their fun!"

He nursed the thought, while for an hour corks popped and knives and forks clattered, and the tempting viands disappeared. The guests had satisfied their hunger, if not their thirst. All were very much flushed, and Mrs. Meeson was fanning her purple face.

"I've eat to my heart's content," she declared, "and I feel as if I'd bust!"

"I wish you would!" murmured Chubb. "Wot an explosion there'd be!"

Mr. Pinch frowned at the cook as he rose unsteadily from his seat, and brought various things from the side-board to the table.

"I 'ave 'ere," he said, "a box of 'Avanas, at three shillings each, some Chartreuse and Benedictine, and 'alf a

dozen bottles of 'is lordship's old Tokay, which is of priceless value. But before we light the fragrant weeds and sip the sparkling liqueur, before the charming ladies 'ave retired to the drawing-room—"

"I ain't goin' to no drawin'-room," vowed Mrs. Meeson. "I don't budge from here!"

"Quite right," said Bilker, the coachman. "Why, I ask, should we be deprived of the company of the lydies?"

"Why should we?" put in Chubb, scenting trouble.

The company, who had already drunk too much, began to applaud. Mr. Pinch looked pained. He had kept himself sober, to do him justice, and his grave expression won silence for him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we have met 'ere to-night, around this festive board, to do 'onour to one who 'ails from a foreign clime, one who was born in the sunny land of France, where the frogs and the Ontong Cordule come from. I refer to Mounseer Pantaloon, who makes your acquaintance to-night, and you may sako it from me that 'e is a jolly good fellow."

"Hear, hear!" broke in half a dozen voices.

"Three cheersh for Pantaloon!" cried the duke's butler.

"Stop, sir—stop!" Mr. Pinch said severely. "You forget, Mr. Jones, that we are not in the 'abit of cheering in the upper suckles."

"I'll cheer if I wan' to," declared Mr. Jones.

"So he shall," vowed Mrs. Meeson: "and if I hadn't eaten too much I'd cheer yourself. Jules, you're a duck. You may kiss me!"

"For shame!" cried Mrs. Rump, who was Sir Lazarus Cohen's cook. "And to think that I've allus took you for a lydy!"

"Let us have peace," said Jules, as he hastily rose and bowed. "Is it that on this happy occasion there should be any unpleasantness? No—a thousand times, no! Ze honour zat you have done

me I feel deeply. I is here—in my heart. I am glad to be in your great City of London: glad to be among you, and I have, in my gratitude, a little surprise for you—prepare."

There was a yell from Mrs. Meeson, for at that instant Chubb, who had stolen behind her, had emptied a bottle of champagne down her neck.

"You owdacious brat!" she shrieked. "Wait till I get hold of you!"

•Tao had dived under the table, and when he emerged on the other side, howling with laughter, Mrs. Meeson hurled at him the remains of a grouse-pie, which missed its aim and struck Mrs. Rump. The latter dashed a dish of trifle into the face of Mrs. Meeson, and then, leaning across the table, she seized the fat cook by the hair. The hair came off—it was false—and Mrs. Meeson fell back with a crash and a scream. All were on their feet, and in the excitement and confusion, while Mr. Pinch was holding Chubb over his knee and belabouring him with a salad-spoon, the door was thrown open, and Lord Valincourt strode into the room, white with passion.

"You scoundrel!" he shouted. "What does this mean? How dare you take such liberties in my house?"

At once there was silence—the silence of fright and terror—save for hysterical sobs from one or two of the women.

"I hope your lordship will forgive us," faltered Mr. Pinch.

"Never in the world!" cried Lord Valincourt. "You are discharged, and be thankful that I do not send you to prison!"

"But—but it isn't our fault, sir," protested the butler. "It was that furriner, Jules Pantaloon. You shouldn't 'ave engaged him, sir, for 'e's as full of mischief as an egg is of meat. It was 'im that enticed us——"

"So it was, your lordship!" put in Mrs. Meeson, as she tried to wipe the trifle from her face. "He told us what he used to do in Patee, when his master the Marquis of Lambush was out of town——"

"That's enough!" broke in Lord Valincourt. "You are not yet aware that Jules Pantaloon is Sexton Blake, the detective."

"Yeez: this is my little surprise," said Sexton Blake, smiling at the dazed company.

The end of the affair was that in the course of a few days certain registry-offices were asked to supply fresh staffs of servants for Lord Valincourt, the Duke of Loamshire, and Sir Lazarus Cohen. As for Sexton Blake, he had enjoyed himself so much that he would not take any payment in money, though he gladly accepted half a dozen bottles of his lordship's priceless Tokay.

THE END.

"N.



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